The Enchanted Cottage

A Fable In Three Acts (1922)

Arthur Wing Pinero

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THE ENCHANTED COTTAGE

A FABLE

IN THREE ACTS

BY

ARTHUR PINERO

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LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

PR
5182
E6
1922

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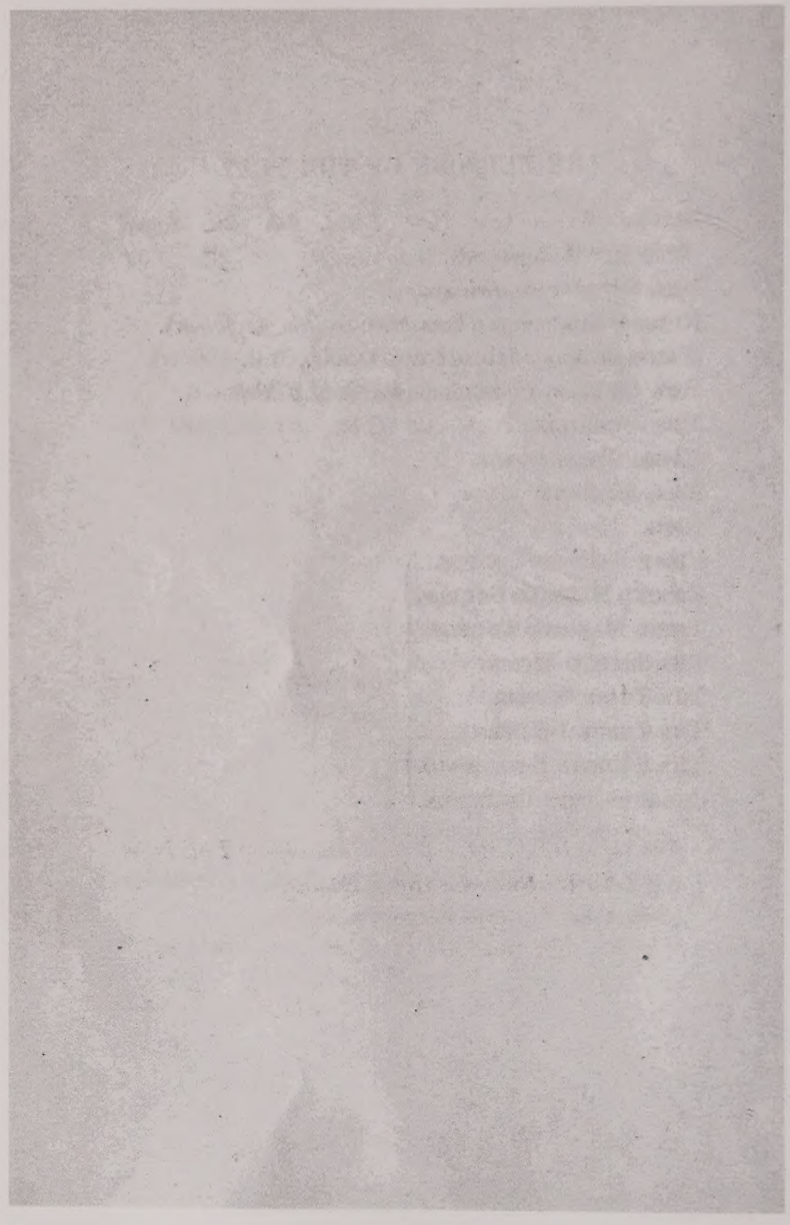
This play was produced in London, at the Duke of York's Theatre, on Wednesday, March 1st, 1922.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

OLIVER BASHFORTH (*late Lieut. 8th Bn. Royal* ********* *Regiment*).
MRS. SMALLWOOD (*his mother*).
RUPERT SMALLWOOD SMALLWOOD (*his stepfather*).
MAJOR MURRAY HILLGROVE, D.S.O., M.C.
REV. CHARLES CORSELLIS (*Rector of Fittlehurst*).
MRS. CORSELLIS.
LAURA PENNINGTON.
MRS. MINNETT.
RIGG.

FIRST MARRIED COUPLE.
SECOND MARRIED COUPLE.
THIRD MARRIED COUPLE.
THE SECOND WITCH.
THE THIRD WITCH.
THE THREE BRIDESMAIDS.
THE FOURTH BRIDESMAID.
CHERUBS, IMPS, CHILDREN.
} (*Shadows*).

The scene is laid at a cottage on the edge of Fittlehurst Park, Lord Wisborough's seat in Sussex.



ACT I.

Relics of the War.

A Spring morning.

ACT II.

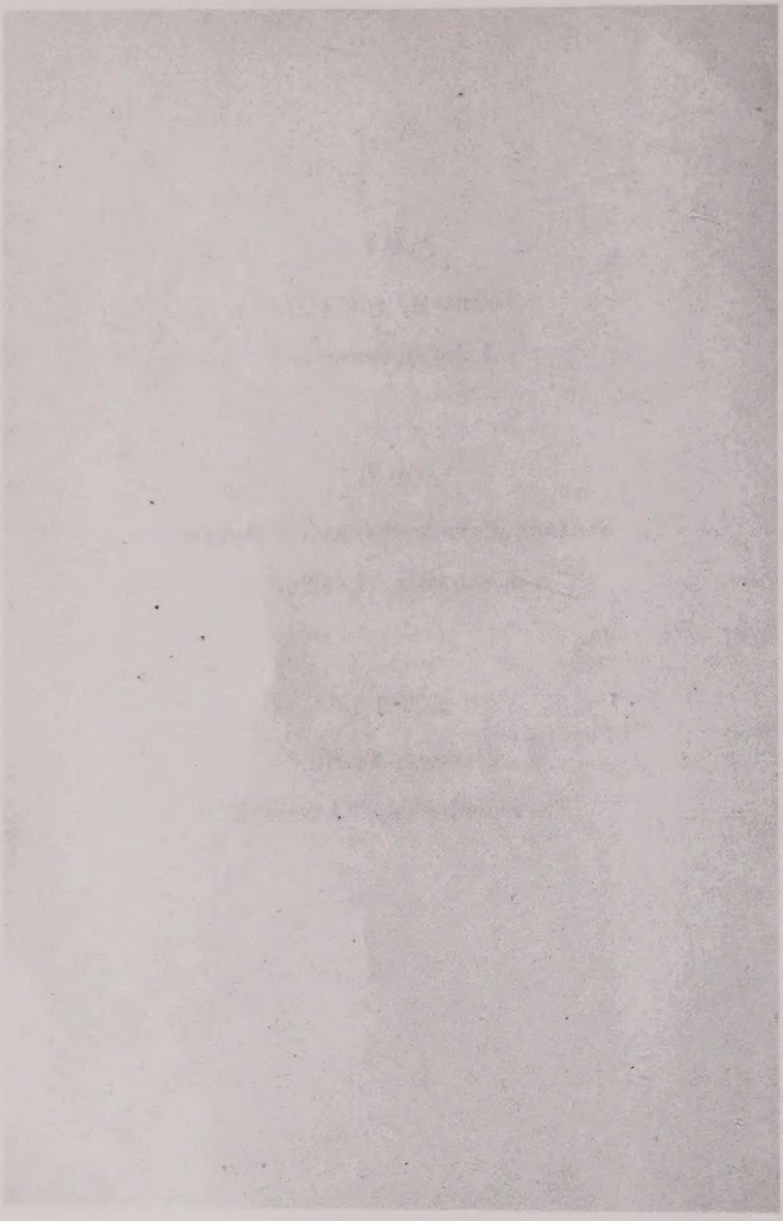
Strange Happenings, and a Dream.

A month later. Evening.

ACT III.

Eternal Truth.

The following day. Afternoon.



THE ENCHANTED COTTAGE

THE FIRST ACT

Relics of the War

The scene represents the inner hall, entrance hall, and staircase of a cottage in the country. Much of the inner hall is of great age, and there are signs in its material and structure that it once formed part of a more important building. (*See Act II, page* 99.)

The inner hall occupies the portion of the stage nearest to the spectator. On the right is a bay-window, casemented, with a window-seat; on the left is a vast fireplace. The fire is laid, but is not burning.

The wall of the inner hall opposite to the spectator is broken by a wide arch, and beyond are the staircase and entrance hall. The front-door of the cottage opens into the entrance hall from the right, and the foot of the stairs, which spring from about the centre of the hall, faces the door. On the left, between the staircase and the farther wall of the

inner hall, runs a passage leading, as it may be supposed, to the kitchen and to the back-door and stable-yard.

The inner hall is furnished simply and appropriately as a living room. On the left, at a short distance from the fireplace, are a settee, comfortably upholstered, and a round table. There is a chair behind the table and another on the right of it. On the nearer side of the fireplace is a long-case clock; close to the clock, fronting the round table, there is a capacious arm-chair; against the wall between the fireplace and the left-hand corner of the room is an oaken dresser with ornamental china and glass on its shelves; and between the dresser and the fireplace is a large basket piled high with logs.

On the right, parallel with, but at some distance from, the bay-window, is an antique refectory-table. A chair is set at either end of the table and on each side of it. Standing against the wall at the farther side of the window are a writing-table and chair; against the wall on the nearer side is an oaken coffer; and against the wall between the left-hand corner of the room and the opening of the arch there is a small table with a tobacco-jar, an array of pipes, a match-bowl, and a box of cigarettes and another of cigars upon it.

In the entrance hall, on the wall at the foot of the stairs, some overcoats, hats, and caps are hanging upon a row of hooks; an umbrella and a number of walking-sticks are in a vase by the front-door; near the vase stands a dinner-gong; and at the mouth of the passage, against the side of the staircase, there is another table on which are a letter-box, a book-rack containing a railway-guide and a directory or two, and a blue-and-white china dish used as a receptacle for visiting-cards. A couple of old mirrors, a copper warming-pan, a barometer, and a few discoloured mezzotint engravings, fill spaces on the walls of both the entrance hall and the inner hall. A flower-bowl is on the round table and another on the refectory-table, the latter filled with wall-flowers. The bowl on the round table is empty save for a little water, but by its side is a tray on which are a heap of freshly cut daffodils, an earthenware jug, and a pair of scissors.

The view from the front-door—which is open—and from the window is of a flower garden partially overshadowed by a dense fringe of pine-trees. The light, modified by the trees, is that of a fine spring morning.

(Note: Throughout, "right" and "left" are the spectators' right and left, not the actor's.)

[MRS. MINNETT, *standing at the round table, is intently taking the daffodils from the tray, trimming their stalks, and arranging them in the bowl. She is in a print dress and an apron —a prematurely old woman of five-and-thirty. Her face is of a strange whiteness and her eyes have a wild look in them, and altogether there is something about her that is uncanny. Hearing footsteps, she turns her head in the direction of the front-door. Presently* LAURA PENNINGTON *and* MAJOR HILLGROVE *appear outside.*]

LAURA.

[*Seeing* MRS. MINNETT.] Good morning, Mrs. Minnett.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Going to the door.*] Good morning, miss.

LAURA.

I've brought Major Hillgrove to call on Mr. Bashforth. Is he in?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*In hushed, level tones.*] He's in, but he's not down yet. [*Drawing back to allow them to pass.*] I'll tell him.

[LAURA *and* HILLGROVE *enter, her arm through his. She is a thin, exceedingly plain young*

woman with a sallow, unhealthy complexion, colourless lips, and a poor, flat chest. Her dull, scanty hair is drawn tightly from her temples and she is so pronouncedly round-shouldered as almost to give the impression that she is deformed. She is wearing a shabby little frock which accentuates her leanness, a faded hat, and well-worn shoes and gloves; but she has an air of quiet cheerfulness and her voice is soft and sweet.]

HILLGROVE.

[*As* LAURA *guides him to the settee.*] Oh, but I mustn't disturb Mr. Bashforth. That won't do!

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Staring at him and shrinking within herself at the sight.*] It's about his time, sir; and he might be angry if I sent you away.

LAURA.

[*To* HILLGROVE, *gently.*] The sofa.

[*Assisted by* LAURA, HILLGROVE *sits, and then she takes his hat and stick from him and lays them by him on the round table. He is a middle-aged man of soldierly bearing with a bright manner and merry laugh. He is blind.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Advancing a little—to* HILLGROVE.] What name shall I say, sir? I didn't catch it.

HILLGROVE.

[*Pulling off a pair of old wash-leather gloves.*] Hillgrove—Major Hillgrove. I'm staying with Lord Wisborough at Fittlehurst House.

LAURA.

[*To* MRS. MINNETT.] Major Hillgrove's servant is down with the 'flu and I happened to be on the spot. Two of Mrs. Willis's children—the head laundry woman—have got mumps.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Nodding.*] I know.

HILLGROVE.

And so Miss—er—[*with a wave of the hand*] this kind young lady——

LAURA.

[*Embarrassed.*] Miss Pennington.

HILLGROVE.

Miss Pennington graciously gave me an arm.

MISS MINNETT.

[*Looking at* LAURA *steadily.*] A kind young lady. That's exactly what Miss Pennington *is*, sir.

LAURA.

[*To* MRS. MINNETT.] Ssh !

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Everybody in the parish will agree with you there.

LAURA.

[*In confusion.*] Don't, Mrs. Minnett !

HILLGROVE.

[*Putting his gloves into his pocket.*] Ha, ha, ha ! I'm sure of it !

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Turning away.*] I'll go up to Mr. Bashforth.

LAURA.

[*As* MRS. MINNETT *ascends the stairs—to* HILLGROVE.] Send for me when you want me, Major Hillgrove. I shall be in the garden. [*Moving towards the front-door, shyly.*] I've only met Mr. Bashforth once or twice.

HILLGROVE.

Wait! Wait a bit! [*She halts.*] Miss Pennington——

LAURA.

[*Returning.*] Yes?

HILLGROVE.

[*Lowering his voice.*] Are we alone?

LAURA.

[*After a glance at the staircase.*] Quite.

HILLGROVE.

[*Dropping his voice still more.*] So that's Mrs. Minnett, is it?

LAURA.

Mr. Bashforth's housekeeper.

HILLGROVE.

Wisborough was telling me her history last night after dinner. Most interesting.

LAURA.

Lord Wisborough recommended her to Mr. Bashforth. She's the widow of one of his keepers.

HILLGROVE.

Tom Minnett; I've shot with him.

LAURA.

He was a reservist, and among the first to go from Fittlehurst. He fell early in the War, at Ypres.

HILLGROVE.

I picture her—a haggard, eerie woman with wandering hands. Wandering hands and bony fingers.

LAURA.

She was very different, poor soul, before she had the notice from the War Office of Minnett's death.

HILLGROVE.

Different—but always witch-like, eh ?

LAURA.

Witch-like ?

HILLGROVE.

[*Smiling.*] Suggestive of a broomstick and a scarlet cloak and steeple-hat.

LAURA.

[*Also with a smile.*] Well, now you speak of it— ! [*Quickly.*] Ah, but not like a *wicked* witch !

HILLGROVE.

There were beneficent witches as well as evil ones in the old days, though both shared the same fate

perhaps. Mrs. Minnett's distinguished ancestress may have belonged to the amiable variety.

LAURA.

Her ancestress ?

HILLGROVE.

Her grandmother, an aged crone of the name of Kindred. She was swum by a mob at a village in Essex as recently as eighteen-sixty-five.

LAURA.

Swum—— ?

HILLGROVE.

Thrown into the water—made to swim for her life; and died in consequence.

LAURA.

[*Somewhat startled.*] I knew Mrs. Minnett is what the people here call a foreigner—not a native of these parts; but I've never heard—oh, how terrible !

HILLGROVE.

This is between ourselves, Miss Pennington. I oughtn't to have repeated the tale.

LAURA.

But, Major Hillgrove, you don't believe in witches, surely ?

HILLGROVE.

Ha, ha, ha——!

LAURA.

At any rate, their descendants don't inherit their qualities.

HILLGROVE.

Ho, we blind chaps amuse ourselves by indulging in all sorts of odd fancies! If we didn't——

LAURA.

[*Listening.*] Hark——!

[*She retreats to the front-door as* MRS. MINNETT *descends the stairs.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

Mr. Bashforth is coming down.

LAURA.

[*In a flutter.*] I'm going to sniff the wall-flowers, Mrs. Minnett, while Major Hillgrove and Mr. Bashforth have their talk.

[*She goes out hurriedly, disappearing into the garden, and* MRS. MINNETT *returns to the round table and finishes the arrangement of the flowers in the bowl.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] I warn you, sir; it's not one of Mr. Bashforth's good days. You must be prepared for that.

HILLGROVE.

[*Sympathetically.*] Really? I'm sorry.

MRS. MINNETT.

He's expecting some visitors from town by-and-by, and it has upset him.

HILLGROVE.

I'll clear out as soon as possible. Unlucky I should have chosen this morning——

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Taking up her tray.*] Here he is.

[*Slowly and laboriously* OLIVER *comes down the stairs. He is the wreck of a handsome young man, broken by the war. His face is drawn and pale, his eyes are sunken, and his clothes hang loosely upon a bent and emaciated frame. He stands glaring resentfully at* HILLGROVE.]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* OLIVER, *under her breath.*] Major Hillgrove, sir.

[OLIVER *advances to the middle of the room, and* MRS. MINNETT, *looking at the two men over her shoulder as she departs, glides away along the passage.*]

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE, *sourly.*] How d'ye do?

HILLGROVE.

Forgive me for intruding on you in this way. I'm staying at Fittlehurst House.

OLIVER.

So I understand.

HILLGROVE.

My old schoolfellow, Eddie Wisborough—your trump of a landlord—has asked me to be his guest through the summer; and it struck me, as you and I are to be neighbours for some months——

OLIVER.

Oh, thanks.

HILLGROVE.

It struck me we might foregather—have a jaw—occasionally.

OLIVER.

[*Scowling at him.*] Very good of you.

HILLGROVE.

A solitary spot you've hit on. You must feel rather lonely at times?

OLIVER.

I've taken this cottage for the purpose of being lonely. [*Tapping his foot on the floor.*] If nobody came near me without an invitation, the better I'd be pleased.

HILLGROVE.

[*Imperturbably.*] Sick man?

OLIVER.

Don't I sound like one?

HILLGROVE.

Where were *you* crocked?

OLIVER.

La Boiselle.

HILLGROVE.

La Boiselle—— ?

OLIVER.

August, 'eighteen.

HILLGROVE.

Where'd they get yer?

OLIVER.

In the neck. [*Moving his head painfully.*] Literally, in the neck. [*Straightening his left leg with difficulty.*] They dam well spoilt my leg too. [*Pressing his palms to his temples.*] But it's my head—it's my head that's hell.

HILLGROVE.

You'll work right, at your age.

OLIVER.

Oh, for God's sake, stop that rot! [*Dropping his hands wearily and looking at* HILLGROVE.] And *you*?

HILLGROVE.

The year before. Thirteenth of April.

OLIVER.

Where?

HILLGROVE.

Vimy.

OLIVER.

[*Gazing at his closed lids.*] I suppose *I* oughtn't to grouse.

HILLGROVE.

[*Lightly.*] Why not, if it eases you?

OLIVER.

You don't, apparently.

HILLGROVE.

Ha, ha, ha! You haven't given me a chance.

OLIVER.

[*Going to him, penitently.*] Major——

HILLGROVE.

Hullo ?

OLIVER.

I'm a selfish brute. Excuse my bad manners. [*Offering his hand.*] I'm holding out my hand to you. [HILLGROVE *raises his hand and* OLIVER *grips it.*] Glad to make your acquaintance.

HILLGROVE.

And I yours. And having broken the ice, I'll be off.

OLIVER.

Off ?

HILLGROVE.

I won't bother you this morning. You've some people coming.

OLIVER.

My mother and stepfather; they're motoring from London.

HILLGROVE.

Quite so.

OLIVER.

[*Glancing at his wrist-watch and then at the clock.*] They've arranged to meet the Rector and his wife here at half-past eleven. They're dragging *them* into the business.

HILLGROVE.

The business—— ?

OLIVER.

My burying myself in this secluded place. [*Limping about the room.*] They won't let me alone. [*Flourishing his arms.*] They *will* interfere with me. They'll drive me mad amongst them. The mater and her husband were down here last week, and when they left me I *was* mad—a raving lunatic. Their latest plan is to saddle Mr. and Mrs. Corsellis with me. The Corsellises, who have seven children tugging at them; and another on the road, I believe! I'm to be put in their charge, anyhow. And they're a worthy couple—the Rector and his wife—and I don't want to insult them. [*Wildly.*] I shall, though; I sha'n't be able to help myself. [*Turning to* HILLGROVE.] I insulted *you* a few minutes ago.

HILLGROVE.

That doesn't matter; I'm not a parson.

OLIVER.

[*Taking a bundle of letters from his breast-pocket and selecting a letter from the bundle.*] Listen to this. From my mother. I haven't slept a wink for it. [*Reading.*] "The more I dwell on it, my dear boy, the more appalled I am at your banishing yourself from your friends and relations, with nobody to care for you but a weird creature whose appearance

positively makes my flesh creep." [*Indignantly.*] Jolly unfair! The woman may be queer, but she does her job! [*Resuming.*] "Rupert is as much concerned as I am—" [*to* HILLGROVE] my step-father—" and so is your sister Ethel. If, therefore, you persist in your eccentric line of conduct, it is our intention to appeal to Mr. and Mrs. Corsellis, strangers as they are to us, to do their utmost, by personal control and supervision, to promote your comfort and relieve the monotony of your existence. As Rupert has just remarked, of what use is the Church if you can't make a convenience of it?"

HILLGROVE.

[*Chuckling.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

OLIVER.

[*Grinding his teeth.*] Shut up, Major! [*Reading again.*] "I am writing to Mr. Corsellis by this post —" [*sinking into the chair on the left of the refectory-table*] and so on. [*Thrusting the letter into a side-pocket of his jacket and leaning his head on his hands.*] Oh! Oh, my head!

HILLGROVE.

[*Soothingly.*] Don't worry; it'll all wash straight. You've only to explain to Mr. and Mrs. Rector on the quiet——

OLIVER.

[*Raising his head.*] My eccentric line of conduct! You see, they don't realize—these stupid belongings of mine—my mother and stepfather, and my busybody of a sister—they don't realize that I'm *done*—finished—down and out. They're so beastly normal, they haven't imagination enough to grasp that my chief object for the future is to avoid those who have known me as I *was*.

HILLGROVE.

Tsch! Rubbish!

OLIVER.

As I was—healthy, strong, active! [*Beating his fists upon his knees.*] Rubbish or not, I tell you I hate and despise myself. No words can describe the loathing, the contempt I have for my shrivelled face and shrunken carcass. I can't bear to catch sight of myself in the glass. It's agony to me. There are days—this is one of them—when I simply can't bear it.

HILLGROVE.

But there are other days—? Come, come, Bashforth—d'ye mind my dropping the "Mr."?——

OLIVER.

[*Fretfully.*] Oh, yes, there are other days, when I can lend old Kiffin a hand in the garden, or hobble

into the village for the sake of a chat with Hilton at the Stores——

HILLGROVE.

Splendid!

OLIVER.

[*Curling his lip.*] I've even achieved the feat of drinking a cup of tea at some of the houses round about here——

HILLGROVE.

Impostor!

OLIVER.

And perhaps, by-and-by, when they start tennis, I shall be able to steel myself to sit with the antiques and look on. [*With a despairing gesture.*] Look on! [*Piteously.*] I was quite a decent lawn-tennis player, Major.

HILLGROVE.

[*Quietly.*] *I've* played a game or two in my time. [*With a touch of grimness.*] I won the Singles at Beckenham one year, and the Mixed Doubles with Mrs. Landon Raper against Miss Bestwick and Crawford Evans.

OLIVER.

[*Sitting upright, open-mouthed.*] Lord! I remember!

HILLGROVE.

[*Groping for his hat and stick.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

OLIVER.

[*Getting to his feet.*] Of course! You're Hillgrove, aren't you! [*Going to him.*] *The* Hillgrove!

HILLGROVE.

[*Finding his hat—still laughing.*] The chap with the forehand drive.

OLIVER.

By Jove! Fancy! [*Giving him his stick.*] And I —I—[HILLGROVE *rises and* OLIVER *grips him by the shoulders*] oh, Major, *what* a brute I am!

[*Eyeing the two men,* MRS. MINNETT *has entered softly, carrying a couple of folded newspapers.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Laying the papers on the farther end of the refectory-table—to* OLIVER.] The papers, sir.

OLIVER.

Thanks.

HILLGROVE.

Is that Mrs. Minnett?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Fetch Miss Pennington, will you, Mrs. Minnett? I'm going home.

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

[*After another look at* HILLGROVE—*a quick look of horror*—MRS. MINNETT, *with noiseless steps, goes out at the front-door and vanishes into the garden.*]

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE—*surprised.*] Miss Pennington?

HILLGROVE.

My man's in bed with influenza, and they got Miss Pennington to arm me across the Park. [*Putting on his hat.*] Nice, gentle little thing.

OLIVER.

[*Carelessly.*] Isn't she!

HILLGROVE.

[*Drawing on his gloves.*] I should like to know more of her.

OLIVER.

Not difficult; she lives in the village. Poor as a rat, but one of the best.

HILLGROVE.

Yes, the plain women of the world! They're the bricks, Bashforth.

OLIVER.

[*Wonderingly.*] You guess she's plain?

HILLGROVE.

[*Smiling.*] Instinct.

OLIVER.

You're right; she isn't beautiful. [*Forcing a laugh.*] Ho, ho! Blessed if Miss Pennington and I aren't a match there! [*Seeing* LAURA *and* MRS. MINNETT *pass the window.*] Ssh! [*Meeting* LAURA *as she enters,* MRS. MINNETT *following her.*] Good morning, Miss Pennington.

LAURA.

[*Shaking hands with him bashfully.*] Good morning.

OLIVER.

Major Hillgrove is ready.

HILLGROVE.

[*To* LAURA, *as she comes to him, and as* MRS. MINNETT *slowly goes up the stairs.*] I haven't kept you long; Mr. Bashforth has a bad head to-day.

LAURA.

[*Turning to* OLIVER.] Oh, I *am* sorry! Have you any phenacetin in the house?

OLIVER.

[*Shaking his head dismally.*] Phenacetin's no use.

LAURA.

Oh, but do let me get you some! The village nurse always has it by her. [*With animation.*] I've left my bicycle at Mrs. Willis's; [*slipping her arm through* HILLGROVE'S] after I've taken Major Hillgrove home I'll run into the village and be back in less than half-an-hour.

OLIVER.

Awfully samaritan of you, but——

LAURA.

[*With a motion of her head towards the passage.*] May we go out that way, and through the copse? It'll save us ten minutes.

OLIVER.

Certainly.

HILLGROVE.

[*As* LAURA *leads him to the passage.*] Ha, ha, ha! What a busy little person it is!

OLIVER.

[*Touching* HILLGROVE'S *arm.*] Good-bye, Major. When do I see you again?

HILLGROVE.

[*Moving away with* LAURA.] To-morrow ?

OLIVER.

[*Following them.*] Shall I hunt you up in the morning ?

HILLGROVE.

[*Out of sight.*] Excellent !

OLIVER.

[*Also disappearing.*] I'll try not to be such a shocking cad when we next meet.

HILLGROVE.

Ha, ha, ha, ha——!

[*Scarcely has the sound of* HILLGROVE'S *laughter died away when* MR. *and* MRS. CORSELLIS *appear at the front-door.* CORSELLIS *presses the bell-push, and the bell is heard to buzz in the distance.* CORSELLIS *is a mild, elderly cleric with the marks of struggle and poverty upon him, and with the round, staring eyes and puzzled air of one who is in constant bewilderment at the difficulties of his position.* MRS. CORSELLIS *is a meagre, delicate-looking lady with a feeble voice and vacant smile.*

Ineffably genteel, she is as poorly clad as her husband and is enveloped in an ancient cape.]

CORSELLIS.

[*Having rung the bell, singing to himself absently.*] "All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful,——" [*Peeping into the room.*] Is anybody at home? [*After a pause, entering.*] May we come in? [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Come in, Jenny; I am sure we are welcome. [MRS. CORSELLIS *enters.*] I dare say you are tired.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Crossing to the settee and seating herself heavily.*] I am rather. [*Tittering.*] He, he, he! A mile and a half is highly creditable under the circumstances.

CORSELLIS.

[*Turning his dull eyes upon her.*] The circumstances——?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Archly.*] Charles!

CORSELLIS.

Oh, of course, my dear; I'd forgotten for the moment.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he! Forgotten! [*Tidying herself.*] Forgotten!

CORSELLIS.

[*Singing again and staring at nothing harder than ever.*] "Each little flower that opens, Each little bird that sings,——"

[OLIVER *returns, making for the front-door.*]

OLIVER.

[*Coming upon* CORSELLIS.] Ah, Rector! [*Shaking hands with him.*] Was it you who rang?

CORSELLIS.

Yes.

OLIVER.

Mrs. Minnett is upstairs—[*discovering* MRS. CORSELLIS] how are you, Mrs. Corsellis?——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Giving him a limp hand.*] Thank you; moderately well.

CORSELLIS.

[*To* OLIVER.] Amazingly well. We've walked from the village——

OLIVER.

[*Pointing to the chair on the left of the refectory-table.*] Do sit down.

CORSELLIS.

[*Sitting.*] A considerable distance for my wife in her present state of health.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Averting her head.*] Darling!

CORSELLIS.

Oh, it's common knowledge, Jenny; [*laying his rusty hat upon the table*] there's not a soul in Fittlehurst that isn't aware of the impending event. [*To* OLIVER.] *You've* heard of it, Mr. Bashforth?

OLIVER.

[*Slightly disconcerted.*] Heard——?

CORSELLIS.

That an addition to my family is, so to speak, hovering between heaven and earth.

OLIVER.

[*Examining his nails.*] Hilton, the manager of the Stores, *was* mentioning——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he, he! What a pretty expression—hovering between heaven and earth!

CORSELLIS.

[*Tapping upon his teeth.*] And when heaven yields its gift, that will make our seventh.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

Eighth, Charles.

CORSELLIS.

[*Weakly.*] Eighth!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*To* OLIVER.] My husband gets so confused, Mr. Bashforth, as the number increases.

CORSELLIS.

[*Reckoning on his fingers mechanically.*] Egbert—Mildred——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*To* OLIVER.] As you may suspect, the living of Fittlehurst is an extremely poor one, even with tithes at their improved rate——

CORSELLIS.

Joan—Stephen——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

And sometimes he feels almost crushed by the weight of his responsibilities.

CORSELLIS.

Barbara—Barbara——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Prompting him.*] Dear little Aggie——

CORSELLIS.

Dear little Aggie——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*To* OLIVER.] With the result that he becomes quite muddled and absent-minded.

CORSELLIS.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] That's only six.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*To* CORSELLIS.] You've left out Peterkin.

CORSELLIS.

Oh—ah—yes—Peterkin——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*To* OLIVER.] But, as I am always saying to Charles, what *is* an addition to a family, however large? He, he, he! A little more water in the teapot!

OLIVER.

[*His elbows resting on the back of the chair on the right of the round table—his attention straying.*] Precisely.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Sapiently.*] Why, therefore, I ask him, should he allow a morbid consciousness of our domestic burdens

to render the discharge of his parochial duties irksome, if not repellent?

OLIVER.

Er—why indeed?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

Why allow it to make his delivery of the services inarticulate and his sermons unintelligible?

CORSELLIS.

[*Suddenly clasping his brow.*] Oh! Oh, dear; oh, dear!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Solicitously.*] Darling!

CORSELLIS.

Do I neglect my duty to my parishioners, Jenny?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

Oh, I don't mean——

CORSELLIS.

Am I inarticulate—unintelligible in the pulpit?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*With an evasive wriggle.*] He, he, he! Well, Charles——

[*A motor-horn hoots repeatedly close at hand, the hoots growing more and more persistent. They all stiffen themselves, listening.*]

OLIVER.

[*After a while.*] My people.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Rearranging the set of her skirt.*] Your mother and stepfather ?

CORSELLIS.

[*Searching his pockets.*] Mr. and Mrs.—Mr. and Mrs.——

OLIVER.

[*His impatience and fretfulness returning.*] Smallwood.

CORSELLIS.

[*Rising.*] I have a letter—I *had* a letter——

OLIVER.

[*His hands to his ears.*] I know, I know—asking you to be here at half-past eleven.

CORSELLIS.

[*Helplessly.*] What *have* I done with your mother's letter ?

OLIVER.

[*Going towards the front-door.*] Stop that noise ! Stop that horrible noise !

[*As he nears the door the horn gives a final screech and* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *a voluble,*

overpowering, but amiable lady, still comely in spite of her fifty years, enters with a rush.]

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Smothering* OLIVER *in an embrace.*] My child! Didn't you hear the horn? How *are* you? Kiss me. I do believe you're looking better. Kiss me again. Not *much* better, but better. [*To* CORSELLIS, *who, at her entrance, has moved to the middle of the room.*] Mr. Carruthers?

OLIVER.

[*Between his teeth.*] Corsellis, mother.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Shaking hands with* CORSELLIS.] How do you do, Vicar—or should it be Rector? Nobody has ever been able to explain the difference to me. How nice of you to respond to our summons! [*Seeing* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Your wife, I'm sure. [*Going to* MRS. CORSELLIS, *who rises with a simper.*] Charming of you too! [*Shaking hands with her.*] I should have known you were the wife of a country clergyman, if I hadn't expected to meet you. [*Laying her handbag on the round table and pulling off her gloves.*] There's something about a country clergyman's wife that's so simple and comforting.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Modestly.*] Oh! He, he, he!

OLIVER.

[*Who has followed his mother—writhing.*] Where's the Step?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

He'll be here in a minute. [*Throwing her gloves on to the table and unbuttoning her coat.*] He's at the wheel. Cookson begged for a day off. Even chauffeurs demand holidays nowadays. [*Getting out of her thick motor-coat with* OLIVER'S *assistance.*] Not that we've missed him in the least; Rupert has driven magnificently. [*Cumbering* OLIVER *with her coat.*] You're still terribly ghastly, my dear son. [*Unwinding a scarf from her neck.*] We ran over some chickens at a place called Piddingfold. Two hens and a male. [*Adding the scarf to* OLIVER'S *load.*] Six shillings each they charged us for them. Rank profiteering! [*Plumping herself down in the chair on the right of the round table and opening her bag as* OLIVER *carries her coat and scarf to the chair at the farther end of the refectory-table and deposits them there.*] In pre-war times we *never* paid more than half-a-crown. [SMALLWOOD *stalks in.*] Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius are before us, Rupert.

SMALLWOOD.

[*A gaunt, lank, black-haired man of fifty-five with a solemn visage and ponderous manner—giving* OLIVER *a hand to dandle.*] Two hours and forty minutes we've done the journey in. [*Bowing to* CORSELLIS *and bestowing a hand upon him.*] Two hours and forty minutes from door to door.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Indicating* MRS. CORSELLIS, *who has resumed her seat.*] Mrs.—the Rector's wife.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Bowing to* MRS. CORSELLIS.] How do you do, madam? [*Presenting his cap to* OLIVER.] Some foolish fowls ran under me at Chiddingfold, or we should have been with you sooner.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Surveying herself in a vanity-glass which she has taken from her bag.*] Their remains are at the bottom of the car. [*To* OLIVER.] May we offer you one, OLIVER?

OLIVER.

[*Receiving* SMALLWOOD'S *gloves, coat, and neck-wrap from him.*] Rather not; thanks all the same.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Fastidious fellow! [*Fussing with her hair.*] Chicken broth is none the less sustaining for being made from a mangled bird. Many is the cup of nutritious soup——

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Forgive the interruption, Violet. [*Coming to the chair on the left of the refectory-table.*] Recollect we haven't more than a quarter-of-an-hour for our—er—[*with a large gesture*] our conference.

OLIVER.

[*Putting* SMALLWOOD'S *coat, etc., upon the chair on the right of the refectory-table—to* SMALLWOOD.] You're not lunching with me, then, Step—you and mother?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Replacing the mirror in her bag.*] Not to-day, my pet.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Sitting.*] We are going on to Bognor.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] My husband hasn't seen Bognor for years.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Funereally.*] Not since I was a curly-headed, frolicsome lad.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* OLIVER.] Besides, I frankly confess I shouldn't care to be waited on at table by that forbidding housekeeper of yours, Olly dear. Rupert declares she reminds him of the witches in "Othello."

SMALLWOOD.

"Macbeth."

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* OLIVER.] How you can have been induced——!

OLIVER.

[*At the chair at the nearer end of the refectory-table—testily.*] Oh, we won't discuss her again, mother, please. [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Mrs. Corsellis——?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

Exceedingly kind of you, Mr. Bashforth, but we must get back to the children.

CORSELLIS.

[*Who has timidly seated himself in the chair behind the round table—sighing.*] Yes, we must get back to the children.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Beaming upon the* CORSELLISES.] Children! You have children?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Coyly.*] Ye-e-es, we have children.

CORSELLIS.

Yes, we have children.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* SMALLWOOD.] Mr. and Mrs. Cornwallis have children of their own, Rupert!

OLIVER.

[*Sitting.*] Good God, why shouldn't Mr. and Mrs. Corsellis have children, mother!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Don't be so tetchy, Oliver. [*To the* CORSELLISES.] You having children makes my task much easier. Only parents can appreciate the feelings of parents. What *my* feelings are with regard to my son you can surmise. Such a bright boy before the war, and now utterly changed! Oh, I don't shut my eyes to facts. Ill he is, undoubtedly. But my contention is this: broken spirits and shattered nerves are not to be restored by leading a monkish existence in the country——

SMALLWOOD.

By resorting to a mode of life which has all the drawbacks of the grave with none of its advantages.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

What I have urged upon Oliver till my throat has ached is that he should make an *effort*. Nothing is done without effort. When I fractured my ankle through being cruelly capsized by Colonel McHugh at the skating-rink in nineteen-thirteen, did I allow the mishap to depress me? Not I. Not *I*! Within a fortnight my bathchair was seen everywhere—picture-shows, wedding parties, a fancy-dress ball at the Albert Hall, everywhere that was on the level. Sometimes I trembled lest I should be voted a nuisance; Bignall, the bathchair-man, was so clumsy. Be that as it may, *that* is the temper in which I would have my boy confront *his* misfortunes. But I seem to have lost every vestige of influence over him, let alone authority. I could cry about it. [*Sentimentally.*] Ah, me! Those happy, far-off days when he would tuck his tiny hand in mine and toddle by my side——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Who has been biting his nails—to* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Excuse me, Violet; whether it will be happy

or not I am unable to predict, but at this rate it will certainly be a far-off day which witnesses our arrival at Bognor.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Bridling.*] Really, Rupert! If I mayn't approach the subject in my own way——

SMALLWOOD.

[*With a wave of the hand.*] Pardon. But you won't be annoyed, I trust, if I occasionally interject the word "Bognor" as a reminder that a benign Providence has provided Time with wings.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Ruffled.*] Oh——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Inclining his head.*] Go on. [*Warningly.*] *Bognor!*

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* SMALLWOOD.] You are too aggravating! [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] You have read my letter, dear lady?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he! Yes.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Then I'll put the question bluntly, without further preamble. [*Darting an aggrieved look at* SMALL-

WOOD.] I can be as brief as anybody when it's necessary. [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] The question is, will you act a mother's part towards this perverse—I must say it—this perverse, obstinate young man? Will you, out of the depth of your maternal heart——?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Cutting in.*] One moment. [*Turning to* OLIVER.] We are assuming, of course, that Oliver is still firm in his resolve——?

OLIVER.

[*Who has been nursing his head—looking up.*] Quite right, Step; firm as a rock.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To the* CORSELLISES.] You hear him?

OLIVER.

What's more, Lord Wisborough's agent promises to grant me a lease of this cottage at Michaelmas, if I apply for it, and——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To the* CORSELLISES.] His father—my first husband—was just the same; *just* the same. Poor Cyril might be alive now but for his—I hate the expression—his pigheadedness. Try as I would,

did I *ever* succeed in persuading Oliver's father to wear an overcoat? No, not even in the bleakest weather. [*Confidentially.*] My dear friends, my first husband was one of those men who *do* not and *will* not take proper precautions. What were the consequences? What *could* be the consequences in such a winter as we had in nineteen-five?

SMALLWOOD.

Bognor.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Turning to him.*] Eh?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Firmly.*] *Bognor.*

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Rising.*] Rupert——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Rising.*] My dear?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*With dignity.*] Do it yourself. I have finished

CORSELLIS.

[*Who has also risen.*] No, no; pray——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

We are most interested. [*To* CORSELLIS.] Aren't we, Charles?

CORSELLIS.

Most; most.

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] My dear Violet, I merely——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Exactly. [*Walking away.*] I leave the affair entirely to you.

OLIVER.

[*Rocking himself from side to side.*] Oh, don't get shirty, mother——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Flouncing about the room.*] Shirty!

OLIVER.

The Step only wants you to hurry up.

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *appealingly.*] Violet——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Shaking her head.*] Not on any account. I won't breathe another syllable.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Advancing to the round table—in a lugubrious voice.*] This puts me in a very difficult position——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Coming forward.*] Ha!

SMALLWOOD.

[*As* MRS. SMALLWOOD *sits in the chair he has just vacated.*] The position of a stepfather is difficult at all times, but to have this thrown upon me is peculiarly embarrassing.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Humming.*] Lal, lal, la, la! Lal, lal, la, la——

SMALLWOOD.

[*After a reproachful glance at* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *motioning to* CORSELLIS *to reseat himself and preparing for action.*] However! [*Sitting in the chair on the right of the round table and addressing* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Mrs. Smallwood was on the point of asking you, madam—in fact, if my memory serves me, she did actually get so far as to ask you—whether you can, and will, make us your debtors by filling her place—to the extent that her place *can* be filled by an individual standing in no blood relationship, or,

indeed, relationship of any sort or description, to my stepson—whether you can, and will, by the exercise of that spirit of unselfishness seldom, it is gratifying to reflect, absent from the moral qualities of those connected with the Church—whether, I repeat, you can, and will—and in petitioning you we invoke, naturally, the sympathetic assistance of your reverend husband—whether——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Her eyes sparkling.*] Bognor!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Turning to her.*] Eh?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Bognor!

OLIVER.

[*Groaning.*] Oh!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *in an injured tone.*] This is petty, Violet.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

It appears to me, if we are to reach Bognor to-day, that *I* had better take it up again!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes.*] Petty.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

A more involved, complicated sentence—— !

SMALLWOOD.

Distinctly petty.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS, *triumphantly.*] To resume—Mr. Smallwood having lost himself in a maze of eloquence—— !

SMALLWOOD.

[*Wincing.*] Sssssss !

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Touching my son's meals, dear lady, *do* you think you could manage to pop in here every morning and settle his meals for him with this Mrs. Thingamy—his housekeeper—in whom I haven't a *particle* of confidence? A postcard from me regularly, dropping you a hint——

OLIVER.

[*As before.*] Oh—— !

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* OLIVER.] Be *quiet,* Olly dear ! [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] His appetite, I may tell you *now,* resembles his father's in an extraordinary degree.

A marvellous phenomenon, heredity! Fish, for example! I'll be bound salt-water fish is as rare in your village as pearls. No matter, if there are trout-ponds in the neighbourhood. My boy is as fond of trout as his father was. Lord bless me, if I were to attempt to calculate how often my first husband entreated me to give him speckle-backed trout when in season, fried, *meunière*, or *au bleu*——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Partly to himself.*] Bognor.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Sharply.*] *What*, Rupert?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Opening his eyes.*] Nothing, Violet.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS, *who, while retaining her smile, shrinks further and further into the settee in consternation as* MRS. SMALLWOOD *proceeds.*] Another idea! An arrangement might be arrived at between us for Oliver to lunch or dine with you at the vicarage—or rectory, whichever it is—once or twice a week——

[*With clenched fists and set jaw,* OLIVER *rises and walks to the window and there stands glaring into the garden.*]

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* CORSELLIS.] And, with the permission of the churchwardens, for him to hand round one of the collecting-plates in church on Sundays. A little excitement of that nature would, in my humble judgment, be beneficial to Oliver.

CORSELLIS.

H'm! [*Tapping upon his teeth again.*] I can't conceive that the excitement of handing a collecting-plate in my church, and observing its ultimate contents, would be injurious to Mr. Bashforth.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he, he!

[OLIVER *moves from the window to the middle of the room.*]

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Then we come to the repairing of his household linen and wearing apparel. The bare notion of a torn sheet, or a sock with a hole in it——!

OLIVER.

[*Breaking in suddenly.*] Mother——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

My boy?

OLIVER.

You've heard that Mr. and Mrs. Corsellis have children. Hasn't it struck you to inquire how many? Evidently it hasn't! And the rectory's a mile and a half away. Do you imagine that Mrs. Corsellis can leave her seven kids and tramp three miles every day to busy herself over my paltry concerns?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Seven!

OLIVER.

Seven, [*glancing at* MRS. CORSELLIS] and—and——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Good gracious! [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Dear lady, Oliver is exaggerating!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

No; there are seven at present.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

At present!

CORSELLIS.

[*Rising.*] Another is, so to speak, hovering between heaven and earth.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he, he! So poetical! Hovering between heaven and earth!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Gasping.*] And is it true they are all at home—those that have ceased to hover?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

All.

CORSELLIS.

[*Coming to the back of the settee—dubiously.*] They *were* at home when we started out.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

The elder children are a little unruly.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

The youngest—— ?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

Just two.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* SMALLWOOD.] Rupert! The fowls! I insist——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Bowing to* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Madam, we insist on your accepting the three reckless fowls to whom I have been compelled to read such a salutary lesson.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Overwhelmed.*] Oh——!

OLIVER.

[*To the* SMALLWOODS.] At any rate, you see. Step —you see, mother——!

SMALLWOOD.

You should have informed us of this earlier, Oliver. [*Rising.*] I do see that it would show a deplorable lack of consideration to trespass on the good nature of anybody with seven children, and with power—to borrow a commercial idiom—with power to add to their number. [*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *as* OLIVER *goes to the foot of the stairs and leans on the stanchion of the banisters with an air of exhaustion.*] You agree, Violet?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Absolutely.

CORSELLIS.

I must admit it would hardly be practicable——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Rising.*] Practicable! Impossible! [*Going to* MRS. CORSELLIS, *who also rises, and seizing her hands.*] My *dear* Mrs. Carmichael, I congratulate you on the size of your family. I congratulate you warmly.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he, he!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Shaking hands with* CORSELLIS, *who joins them.*] I congratulate you *both*, my dear Canon.

SMALLWOOD.

[*At the right of the refectory-table, putting on his neck-wrap—to* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] This will necessitate the adoption of your alternative scheme, Violet.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Bustling to the refectory-table and putting on her scarf.*] Yes, we will go into the subject thoroughly with Ethel this evening. [*To the* CORSELLISES, *as* OLIVER *turns quickly and listens with a face full of alarm.*] My unselfish girl—she is prepared to make *any* sacrifice for her brother. [*Taking up her coat.*] Help me, Olly dear.

OLIVER.

[*Coming to her assistance—blankly.*] Ethel! [*Stammering.*] Where—where—where—where the devil—[*to the* CORSELLISES] sorry—[*to* MRS. SMALLWOOD] w-w-where does Ethel come in, mother?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Struggling into her coat.*] Ethel has expressed her willingness to join you at the end of the season,

Oliver, and, if no one else can be found to do it, to take over the management of your cottage.

OLIVER.

[*Aghast, his arms falling to his sides.*] Great Cæsar!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Oh, of course you will raise obstacles! [*Buttoning her coat.*] You oppose me in everything, my child.

OLIVER.

But—but—but—Ethel and I have never hit it off, mother. We fight like cat and dog; you know we do.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Loftily.*] Ethel's temper has improved considerably of late, Oliver, whatever *yours* has become. [*Pointing to her gloves and handbag.*] My gloves——

OLIVER.

[*Fetching the gloves and handbag from the round table and giving them to* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Her nose! Oh, lord, her nose! I can't stand Ethel's nose. *That* hasn't improved.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Drawing on her gloves.*] I should prefer *not* discussing your sister's facial characteristics in the

presence of our friends here. [*To* SMALLWOOD.] Rupert——?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Who has got into his overcoat unaided—to the* CORSELLISES.] We may have the pleasure of dropping you, with the fowls, on our way? We pass through the village.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Again overwhelmed.*] Oh! He, he, he!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* OLIVER.] Lend me a hand with the car, Oliver. The process of waggling the crank is particularly distasteful to me.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*As* OLIVER *slouches out at the front-door droopingly, going to* MRS. CORSELLIS *and taking her arm.*] Come along, dear lady. [*Walking her to the door.*] I wish I'd time to run into the deanery and kiss your sweet children, but this tiresome Bognor——

SMALLWOOD.

[*Who has preceded them—turning and confronting* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] No, Violet; we are not lunching at Bognor. My plans are altered.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Not——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Severely.*] After what has occurred, the very name of the place stinks in my nostrils.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Where——?

SMALLWOOD.

LITTLEHAMPTON.

[*He departs, the two ladies following him.*]

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Tossing her head.*] Ho! Littlehampton or Jericho for aught I care! [*Disappearing with* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Talk about pettiness——!

CORSELLIS.

[*Slowly and thoughtfully wandering after them, picking up his hat as he goes and again singing to himself.*] "The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high or lowly, And ordered their estate." [*Passing the foot of the stairs, he sees* MRS. MINNETT *coming down.*] Ah, Mrs. Minnett! A fine day!

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Joylessly.*] Yes, sir.

CORSELLIS.

[*Singing.*] "All things bright and beautiful, [*going out*] All creatures great and small, [*disappearing*] All things wise and wonderful,——"

MRS. MINNETT.

[*After a short silence—standing near the open door and crooning softly.*] "The purple-headed mountain, The river running by, The sunset and the morning, That brightens up the sky;——"

[LAURA, *flushed and rather out of breath, creeps in from the passage.*]

LAURA.

[*Finding* MRS. MINNETT *alone, taking up the hymn in a cheerful but low voice.*] "All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small,——" Where is Mr. Bashforth, Mrs. Minnett?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Smiling wanly upon her.*] He's had visitors. [*Motioning towards the garden.*] I think he's at the gate, saying good-bye to them.

LAURA.

[*Producing a little paper packet.*] Get me a glass of water, will you? [*Coming to the nearer end of the*

refectory-table.] I want him to take two of these tablets, to relieve his headache. [MRS. MINNETT *nods and, casting a keen look at* LAURA, *goes along the passage. The motor-horn emits a succession of monitory hoots.* LAURA *takes off her gloves and, singing to herself as she does so, opens the packet and selects two of the tablets and lays them carefully on the table.*] "The cold wind in the winter, The pleasant summer sun, The ripe fruits in the garden, He made them every one;—" [OLIVER *returns, unheard, and stands gazing at her dully.*] "All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful,——"

OLIVER.

[*Advancing.*] That the phenacetin?

LAURA.

[*Startled.*] Oh—! [*Answering him.*] Yes.

OLIVER.

You've been very quick.

LAURA.

Luck. I found Nurse at her lodgings, packing up to go to a case at Gould's Farm. [MRS. MINNETT *re-enters, carrying a glass of water.*] Thank you, Mrs. Minnett. [*Giving him the two tablets, one after*

the other.] Two now—[*He takes the tumbler from* MRS. MINNETT *and swallows the tablets.*] and two more in three or four hours' time, if the head's still painful. [*As he gulps the second tablet.*] Capital! [*He returns the tumbler to* MRS. MINNETT *and* LAURA *gives him the paper packet.*] I should advise you to send to Ibbs and Perry, the chemists at Petborough, for a whole bottle of them. [*To* MRS. MINNETT, *who is moving away.*] Jog Mr. Bashforth's memory, Mrs. Minnett, if he forgets.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Nodding again.*] I will, miss.

[*With another eager look over her shoulder, she withdraws. Putting the paper packet into his waistcoat-pocket,* OLIVER *has turned from* LAURA *and is now seated on the settee, his arms hanging loosely and his chin on his breast.*]

LAURA.

[*Breaking an awkward silence.*] T-t-that's right. [*Picking up her gloves, which she has laid on the refectory-table.*] You *ought* to keep quiet after a dose of phenacetin. [*Tiptoeing towards the passage.*] Good morning.

OLIVER.

[*In a blurred voice.*] I say, Miss Pennington!

LAURA.

[*Halting.*] Yes ?

OLIVER.

I shall have to leave this cottage.

LAURA.

Leave—— ?

OLIVER.

Hide myself somewhere or other; there's nothing else for it.

LAURA.

[*Approaching him.*] Oh, Mr. Bashforth ! Why ?

OLIVER.

[*Raising his head.*] Because of my people. They *won't* let me alone. They *will* pester me—torment me.

LAURA.

Torment you ?

OLIVER.

They've been here again this morning—my mother and stepfather; they've just gone. [*With sudden fierceness.*] What do you think they've sprung on me now ?

LAURA.

[*Half scared.*] W-w-what ?

OLIVER.

My sister Ethel! She's coming down by-and-by. Ethel's coming down!

LAURA.

On a—on a visit?

OLIVER.

Visit! No. To squat. To dig herself in permanently.

LAURA.

But won't that—be nice for you?

OLIVER.

Nice!

LAURA.

Your—your *sister!*

OLIVER.

You don't know her. She's awful. She's older than I am and a tyrant—a meddlesome tyrant.

LAURA.

[*Smiling faintly in reproof.*] For shame!

OLIVER.

A vinegary one, too! She realizes she's a failure, and that makes her acid. She'll never get a husband; her nose will always stand in her way.

LAURA.

Her n-n-nose ?

OLIVER.

The most assertive nose that ever adorned a human countenance. [*Laughing mirthlessly.*] Ho, ho! I see their game—the mater's and the Step's! This would provide a fresh opening for Ethel's activities and rid them of her at home. Ho, ho, ho! Wouldn't things hum in the village if Ethel once planted her foot here! [*Throwing himself at full length on the settee, face downward.*] Ho, ho, ho, ho!

LAURA.

[*After a pause, seating herself timidly on the edge of the chair on the right of the round table.*] Mr. Bashforth——

OLIVER.

[*His head buried in the pillow of the settee.*] Ho, ho, ho!

LAURA.

[*Twiddling her gloves.*] I—I hope you won't be angry with me for offering you advice—that you won't think I'm presuming on our slight acquaintance.

OLIVER.

Not I.

LAURA.

Whether you remain in this cottage or go elsewhere, it isn't good for you to live alone—practically alone, for you can't count poor Mrs. Minnett or any person in her position, can you? [*Entreatingly.*] Do—do fall in with this plan of your people's. Give it a trial.

OLIVER.

[*Groaning into the pillow.*] Oh!

LAURA.

I am sure you are unjust to your sister. In spite of the hard things you say of her, she must be a kind woman, to be ready to exchange London for Fittlehurst; she *must* be. Oh, it's dreadful that you should have no companion; on a wet day, and in the long evenings, nobody to read to you, or play cards with you, and fill your pipe for you, and chat over the news in the papers! [*Slowly he lifts himself on to his elbow and, unnoticed by her, regards her curiously.*] Often and often, during the rough weather we've had lately, when the wind has been roaring in my chimney, and my fire hissing at the rain, I've pictured you sitting here in solitude, and I—I— [*Becoming conscious of his gaze, she falters, breaks off, and begins to draw on her gloves.*] K-K-Kiffin—your gardener—is mending

the valve of one of my bicycle-tyres. [*Rising.*] He'll have done it by now.

OLIVER.

[*Putting his feet to the ground.*] No; don't go yet.

LAURA.

[*In some confusion.*] Oh, but I've——

OLIVER.

Listen. [*Staring before him, his hands gripping his knees.*] Don't be startled at what I—what I'm going to propose to you. Fancy your thinking of me like that! Thank you. Talk about a kind woman! *You're* a kind little woman, and no mistake!

LAURA.

Oh, please——!

OLIVER.

You wouldn't get on a man's nerves—strip the very skin off him; *you* wouldn't—! [*Rising and going to her.*] Look here! I *am* desperately wretched at times. *You* can't be much gayer. We're both jolly well in the same boat. Miss Pennington, will you give up your lodgings and move into my cottage? We'd be married first, of course. [*She stands petrified.*] *That* would keep my silly mother and my shrill sister and my solemn, pompous stepfather at arm's length!

[*She backs away from him a step or two.*] I'd be good to you—endeavour not to try your patience. When I felt extra bad, I'd sneak away and shut myself in my room. And I've eight-hundred-a-year of my own —enough for comfort——

LAURA.

[*Palpitatingly.*] You—you—you know so little of me.

OLIVER.

Your father and mother were gentlefolk—the gossip of the village is my authority; and anyhow——

LAURA.

If you—if you want to marry—and keep your people at arm's length—there must be dozens of smart, pretty girls in London, in your own set——

OLIVER.

Pretty girls! *Pretty!* It's the pretty girls I've splashed about with in town that I can't face—that I haven't the courage to face! [*Opening his arms.*] Look at me. A hideous casualty for the rest of my life! An eligible husband for a pretty girl *I* am!

LAURA.

I—I understand. You ask me to marry you, Mr. Bashforth, not only because your installing a

wife here—any wife—would stop your family from worrying you, but because I possess the special qualification of being ugly. [*Steadying herself.*] I—I am greatly obliged to you.

OLIVER.

[*Appalled at the mess he has made of it.*] M-M-Miss Pennington——!

LAURA.

[*Attempting to pass him.*] It—it doesn't matter.

OLIVER.

[*Intercepting her.*] For heaven's sake, Miss Pennington——

LAURA.

Ah——! [*Turning from him suddenly and sinking into the chair on the left of the refectory-table.*] Ah! [*Covering her face with her hands.*] Ah, how *can* you! How *can* you!

OLIVER.

[*Brokenly.*] Forgive me. I—I'm a blundering ass. What I—what I meant was—oh, I wouldn't have hurt you for the world! [*Moving about the room distractedly.*] What I meant was, no woman would marry me except from compassion; and the girls in my set, as you call them, are not the sort who'd give up their dancing and racketing to devote themselves

to a helpless, unsightly, neurotic chap such as I've become. That's the point—whether you can bring yourself to take pity on me. [*Sitting in the chair on the right of the round table.*] Oh, I know there'd be no romance in our marriage—*couldn't* be. But we could be pals, you and I. I can't offer you anything else. Simply pals. [*Seeing that she is furtively drying her eyes.*] Oh, I *am* sorry I've hurt you!

LAURA.

[*Turning to him.*] *Don't* be. It was stupid of me to be upset. [*Smiling at him through her tears.*] As if I wasn't aware of my ugliness! [*Wrying her mouth at him playfully.*] But it's a shock to be told of it so bluntly—for, of course, I see through your excuses; they wouldn't deceive a babe.

OLIVER.

[*His head in his hands.*] Damn! Oh, damn!

LAURA.

[*Buttoning a glove.*] One recommendation I venture to make, Mr. Bashforth. If ever you again approach an ugly woman in this way, bear in mind that even ugly women, conscious as they may be of their defects, have their dreams. [*Resting her hands in her lap and drawing a deep breath.*] Their dreams!

OLIVER.

[*Looking up.*] Dreams?

LAURA.

[*Softly.*] Day dreams as well as night dreams—golden dreams—merciful dreams——

OLIVER.

Merciful——?

LAURA.

Dreams of forgetfulness, of oblivion—dreams in which they are as lovely and desirable as the loveliest and the most desirable of their sex. [*Resuming the buttoning of her gloves.*] Remember that, and that to spare them too complete an awakening is a deed of charity.

OLIVER.

[*Getting to his feet.*] Miss Pennington—your name's Laura, isn't it?—Laura——!

[MRS. MINNETT *enters quietly from the passage and, without raising her eyes, goes to the farther end of the refectory-table. She is carrying a white table-cloth and a small cruet-stand.*]

LAURA.

[*Jumping up brightly and holding out her hand to* OLIVER.] Just going, Mrs. Minnett.

OLIVER.

[*Seizing her hand.*] Laura—[*in a whisper, with an eye on* MRS. MINNETT, *who, having placed the table-cloth and cruet-stand upon the table, takes up the newspapers and lays them on the writing-table*] will you see me this afternoon if I walk into the village? [*While* MRS. MINNETT'S *back is turned to them—vehemently.*] You must. [LAURA'S *lips form the word "No," and she tries to disengage her hand.*] You must!

LAURA.

[*As* MRS. MINNETT *returns to the refectory-table and proceeds to unfold the cloth—in a frightened voice.*] Oh, v-v-very well, then—if you——

OLIVER.

[*Releasing her.*] Thanks.

LAURA.

[*With an effort at composure.*] Good-bye. [*Hurrying to the passage.*] My bicycle's in the stable-yard. Don't come out, Mr. Bashforth. [*Over her shoulder.*] Morning, Mrs. Minnett.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Spreading the cloth over the farther half of the refectory-table.*] Good morning, miss. [LAURA *dis-*

appears. OLIVER *follows her as quickly as he can hobble. Whereupon* MRS. MINNETT *darts from the table and watches the retreating figures. Then, with an exultant chuckle, she throws her arms in the air and waves her hands above her head.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha—— !

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

Strange Happenings, and a Dream

The scene is that of the preceding Act. It is night-time and the front-door is closed and the window-curtains are drawn. An oil lamp burns brightly on the round table, another on the writing-table, and a smaller one on the table in the entrance hall. The lamps are prettily shaded. A woman's work-bag and needlework and a few books are on the round table. The bowl which stood on the round table in Act I is now on the dresser. The other bowl is still on the refectory-table. Both are filled with such flowers as can be gathered from an English garden in May.

Two bedroom candlesticks are on the table in the entrance hall. A box of matches is in the tray of each candlestick.

[*There is nobody in the inner hall or entrance hall; but in a little while the front-door bell rings in the distance, and presently* Mrs.

MINNETT, *in a black dress and white apron, comes softly along the passage and opens the door.* MAJOR HILLGROVE *and* RIGG, *his servant, are outside.*]

RIGG.

[*A man of soldierly appearance and manner, minus his right arm.*] Good evenin', ma'am.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*In her flat, toneless voice, but with a strange gleam in her eyes.*] Good evening, Mr. Rigg. [*To* HILLGROVE.] Come in, sir. [RIGG *conducts* HILLGROVE *to the left of the refectory-table and, having put down his own cap, takes* HILLGROVE'S *cap and stick from him and places them on the table.* MRS. MINNETT *shuts the door and comes forward.*] Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth are expecting you, sir. They've gone for a stroll in Tod's Lane. They won't be more than a few minutes.

HILLGROVE.

[*Taking off his gloves and putting them into the pocket of a cape he is wearing.*] What time is it, Mrs. Minnett ?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Glancing at the clock.*] Half-past nine, sir.

HILLGROVE.

A late hour for a call. Couldn't get down sooner. [*As* RIGG *relieves him of his cape.*] Phew! Glad to be rid of *that*, Rigg.

RIGG.

[*Laying the cape on the chair at the farther end of the refectory-table.*] Dessay you are, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Who is in a dinner-jacket—feeling round about him for a chair.*] If it wasn't so early in the year, I'd swear we were going to have a thunder-storm.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*As* RIGG *returns to* HILLGROVE *and seats him in the chair on the left of the table.*] The air *is* stifling, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*To* RIGG.] Rigg——

RIGG.

[*Bringing himself to attention.*] Yessir?

HILLGROVE.

Perhaps Mrs. Minnett will let you sit in her kitchen till I want you again.

MRS. MINNETT.

Certainly I will, with pleasure. [*Looking at* RIGG.] Any soldier-man——!

RIGG.

[*Picking up his cap.*] Thank'ee kindly, ma'am.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Going to the mouth of the passage.*] This way, Mr. Rigg.

HILLGROVE.

Mrs. Minnett——

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Halting.*] Sir?

HILLGROVE.

One moment.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* RIGG, *who is at her heels—pointing.*] Through that door. [*With a nod* RIGG *departs, and* MRS. MINNETT *returns to* HILLGROVE.] I'm here, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Hesitatingly.*] Er—Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth quite well, Mrs. Minnett?

MRS. MINNETT.

Quite, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Nothing amiss, eh?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Smiling oddly.*] Nothing, sir.

HILLGROVE.

That's right. I've been away for a fortnight, you know—with an invalid sister in Worcestershire. When I got back this afternoon I found a note from Mr. Bashforth which rather—[*stroking his head*] rather puzzled me.

MRS. MINNETT.

Puzzled you, sir ?

HILLGROVE.

Rigg is a confoundedly bad reader of hand-writing —makes a frightful hash of it as a rule—but there was something in the note—however, they're both well, you say ?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Her queer smile never leaving her.*] Both, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Then—[*bending forward, his elbows on his knees*] then what has happened to them, Mrs. Minnett—what has happened to the young couple that's so—so *extraordinary ?*

MRS. MINNETT.

I—I can't tell you, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Bethinking himself and sitting upright.*] Of course not; of course not. [*Brightly.*] When were they married, Mrs. Minnett?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Seating herself stealthily in the chair on the right of the round table.*] A week ago, sir, yesterday.

HILLGROVE.

At Fittlehurst Church?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir; by license.

HILLGROVE.

A very short honeymoon!

MRS. MINNETT.

Oh, no, sir; they're spending their honeymoon here, in this cottage. *This* is their honeymoon.

HILLGROVE.

I see.

MRS. MINNETT.

After the ceremony they lunched at the rectory; and then they went for a drive in a hired car, and were home for dinner.

HILLGROVE.

They preferred the simple comforts you can give them to an expensive hotel? Sensible of 'em.

MRS. MINNETT.

You'll be the first person they've seen, sir, since their marriage, except me; and *me* they're shy of.

HILLGROVE.

Indeed? I'm flattered.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Her smile broadening to a grin and her eyes glowing more intensely.*] It *is* a privilege, sir—[*lowering her voice almost to a whisper*] because Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth are in hiding.

HILLGROVE.

Ha, ha! Naturally.

MRS. MINNETT.

Concealing themselves. They never stir out till nightfall, and *then* they wrap themselves up and cover their faces for fear they should meet anybody.

HILLGROVE.

Ha, ha, ha! A little modesty is refreshing in these days, Mrs. Minnett.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Rubbing the palms of her hands together gleefully.*] They shun even Mr. Kiffin—old Kiffin the gardener. [*Rocking herself to and fro.*] Ho, ho, ho, ho! Ho, ho, ho—! [*Suddenly.*] Ssh! [*Rising and tiptoeing to the front-door.*] Footsteps on the gravel path! [*Straining her ears.*] It's *them!*

[*She opens the door eagerly.*]

OLIVER.

[*Outside, in a muffled voice.*] Major Hillgrove here yet, Mrs. Minnett?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir; he's waiting.

OLIVER.

Good!

[LAURA *and* OLIVER *enter, she in a long cloak and thickly veiled, he in an overcoat and a cap which is pulled down over his brows. His coat-collar is turned up so that scarcely more than the tip of his nose is visible. They come to the middle of the inner hall and stand close together as if anxious to shield each other.* MRS. MINNETT *shuts the front-door and then goes to the mouth of the passage.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* OLIVER.] Major Hillgrove's servant is in the kitchen, sir.

OLIVER.

All right.

[MRS. MINNETT *vanishes, and* LAURA, *after a brief pause, during which* HILLGROVE, *by a gesture, expresses great bewilderment, steals into the entrance hall and peers along the passage to assure herself that* MRS. MINNETT *is out of earshot.*]

HILLGROVE.

[*Unable to contain himself any longer.*] What's the matter? In God's name, what's the matter, Bashforth?

OLIVER.

[*As* LAURA *returns to him.*] Wonderful! Wonderful!

LAURA.

[*Breathlessly.*] Oh, wonderful!

OLIVER.

We'll tell you directly.

[*Simultaneously* LAURA *and* OLIVER *divest themselves of their outdoor things and reveal*

themselves as splendid specimens of blooming womanhood and vigorous young-manhood. Her simple dinner-gown displays a pair of shapely arms and a perfectly modelled throat; her eyes are big and luminous, her figure is full, her hair bright and luxuriant, and her face faultless in its complexion and contour. OLIVER, *who has lost all traces of his lameness, runs with a light and springy step into the entrance hall and hangs his overcoat and cap on one of the hooks at the foot of the stairs, while* LAURA, *having flung her cloak, hat, and veil on to the chair behind the round table, comes to* HILLGROVE *and stands before him with her arms extended.*]

LAURA.

Oh! Oh, Major Hillgrove, if you could only—only see us!

OLIVER.

[*Also in a dinner-jacket—coming between* LAURA *and* HILLGROVE.] By Jove, yes! If you could only see us!

LAURA.

It was I who proposed sending for you, Major Hillgrove. We didn't know where to turn for advice, if not to you.

OLIVER.

We're in such a deuce of a predicament !

HILLGROVE.

[*Listening tensely, his bewilderment increasing.*] Predicament ?

LAURA.

[*Her hand clasped in* OLIVER'S.] You understood from Oliver's letter, didn't you, that something has befallen us—something out of the common ?

HILLGROVE.

Vaguely.

OLIVER.

I couldn't be more explicit in a letter.

HILLGROVE.

But what *has* befallen you ?

LAURA.

You'll never believe us.

OLIVER.

Never.

LAURA.

I—I—I've become beautiful, Major Hillgrove.

OLIVER.

It's a fact; we're not fooling you.

HILLGROVE.

Beautiful ?

OLIVER.

[*Gazing at* LAURA.] Gloriously beautiful.

LAURA.

And as for Oliver—I can't describe the change in Oliver !

OLIVER.

My wife is growing lovelier and lovelier every day, Hillgrove !

LAURA.

And Oliver stronger and straighter and handsomer !

OLIVER.

Dash it, man, don't you *hear* the difference in us ?

LAURA.

Don't you *hear*, Major Hillgrove ?

HILLGROVE.

[*Dumfounded.*] Yes—yes——

LAURA.

[*Detaching herself from* OLIVER *and walking unsteadily to the settee.*] Ah ! Ah ! Ah ! [*Faintly.*] Oh, I'm frightened ! I'm frightened ! [*Sinking on to the settee.*] I'm frightened !

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE, *waving an arm in the direction of the kitchen.*] Laura has been giving me this woman's history. She had it from you—it didn't soak into her at first——

LAURA.

I recollected it suddenly—in a flash—the other night.

HILLGROVE.

Woman—— ?

LAURA.

Mrs. Minnett.

OLIVER.

My housekeeper.

LAURA.

The witch. [*Under her breath, with a little shudder.*] The witch !

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE, *in a low tone.*] My wife is afraid that we are under some sort of spell—enchantment. She's got it on her brain. [*Uneasily.*] Ha, ha ! It sounds ridiculous——

LAURA.

[*Starting.*] Hark ! [*Clutching at her heart.*] What's that ?

OLIVER.

[*Turning his head towards the window—after a pause.*] Rain. [*Going to her.*] Thought we should have it.

HILLGROVE.

When—when——?

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] When did the change begin? [HILLGROVE *nods blankly.*] Yesterday week.

LAURA.

On our home-coming.

OLIVER.

After our marriage.

LAURA.

Almost as soon as we set foot in the cottage.

OLIVER.

[*Glancing, over his shoulder, at the front-door.*] She was at the door, to welcome us—the open door——

HILLGROVE.

Mrs. Minnett?

LAURA.

She seemed as if she couldn't take her eyes off us. Wherever we moved—[*cowering at the sound of distant thunder*] oh——!

OLIVER.

[*Sitting beside her and holding her hand again protectingly—to* HILLGROVE.] That's when the change *began*. It was gradual.

LAURA.

[*Nestling up to him.*] Yes, it wasn't till we had finished dinner, and the lamps were lighted, and we were left to ourselves——

OLIVER.

[*Pressing her to him.*] It wasn't till then that I felt sure—sure—that Laura was positively pretty.

LAURA.

And I of the marvellous alteration in Oliver.

OLIVER.

I'd noticed earlier in the evening, before she went upstairs to dress for dinner, that she was no longer—[*in a difficulty*] no longer——

LAURA.

[*Her lips to his ear.*] No longer hideous.

OLIVER.

[*Tenderly.*] Ssh! Ah, you never were that!

LAURA.

[*Laughing softly.*] Ha, ha! Major Hillgrove knows better; don't you, Major Hillgrove?

HILLGROVE.

[*Troubled.*] I?

LAURA.

You guessed I was exceedingly plain, the day we first met. You told Oliver so. Confess!

OLIVER.

[*As* HILLGROVE, *abashed, bows his head.*] But it was the next morning, over the breakfast-table, that I saw clearly that my wife was more than merely pretty. I—I—well, I own I was flabbergasted. The hollows had gone from her cheeks, and she had the colour of a ripe cherry, and her arms, which used to be such poor little lean things——

LAURA.

Like drum-sticks! [*Jumping up and advancing to the middle of the room.*] You remember, Major Hillgrove? You *must* remember how bony my arm was when I marched you down from Fittlehurst House to make your call on Oliver. [*Drawing up her sleeve as far as possible and surveying her arm proudly.*] Now Oliver says they are as smooth and as plump——!

[*There is another, and a nearer, rumble of thunder and again she utters a cry of terror.*] Oh! [OLIVER *rises and hurries to her, and, clinging to him, she lays her head on his breast.*] Oh, I'm frightened! I'm frightened! I'm frightened!

HILLGROVE.

[*After the noise of the thunder has ceased—in a still voice.*] But why—why should you be frightened, Mrs. Bashforth? What is there to be alarmed about?

OLIVER.

What is there—— ? [*Loudly.*] Confound it, Hillgrove, if Mrs. Minnett is a witch——!

LAURA.

[*Raising her head.*] Ssh! Take care! [*Running into the entrance hall and peering along the passage again.*] Take care!

OLIVER.

[*Going to* HILLGROVE *and speaking in a quieter tone.*] If Mrs. Minnett is a witch, and the change in us is her doing—of course, I don't believe it myself—I'm not as credulous as that——

LAURA.

[*Rejoining* OLIVER.] If she is a witch, and our transformation is owing to sorcery, what she can give she can take away!

OLIVER.

Exactly! Stands to reason!

LAURA.

Supposing I offended Mrs. Minnett, or Oliver did! It's easy to offend, without meaning to.

OLIVER.

Witches were mischievous people, weren't they, in olden times? [*Picking at his nails.*] Suppose—for the sake of argument—suppose this woman does possess—what's the name of it?——

LAURA.

Supernatural power——

OLIVER.

She may be playing off some devilish trick on us!

LAURA.

Anyhow, we're most awkwardly situated. The Fittlehurst folks have accustomed themselves to regard me as the ugliest person in the district.

OLIVER.

And me, the little while I've been among 'em, as a helpless wreck of a fellow to be pitied and condoled with.

LAURA.

They'll hate to have their settled ideas disturbed.

OLIVER.

Loathe it.

LAURA.

It's really very hard on us.

OLIVER.

We only married each other for mutual consolation —to keep each other in countenance, as it were.

LAURA.

For companionship simply.

OLIVER.

It's the biggest sell on record.

LAURA.

[*Leaving* OLIVER *and walking about ecstatically.*] Ah! Ah! And yet I'm glad—glad—glad to be lovely, for Oliver's sake.

OLIVER.

[*Smugly.*] Comes to that, *I'm* glad that Laura should have a husband who is fairly presentable.

LAURA.

I could summon up courage to show myself in the village if I were certain—certain—I am to remain beautiful.

OLIVER.

Precisely! That's the point.

LAURA.

It's the *un*certainty that's so perplexing.

OLIVER.

Damnable. And we daren't leave Fittlehurst; it would be such a slight on Mrs. Minnett.

LAURA.

[*Returning to* OLIVER, *who has moved to the settee.*] The moment we left the cottage we might find ourselves losing our good looks.

OLIVER.

Altogether the position is—oh, it's unique!

[*A flash of lightning is seen through the window-curtains.*]

LAURA.

[*Faintly.*] Oh! [*To* HILLGROVE, *standing between him and* OLIVER.] Advise us, Major Hillgrove.

OLIVER.

Give us your advice, old man.

LAURA.

[*Stretching out her hands in appeal.*] Major Hillgrove——

[*A mighty burst of thunder crashes over the roof of the cottage and, with a shriek,* LAURA *throws herself into* OLIVER'S *arms. At the same moment* MRS. MINNETT *appears in the entrance hall carrying a tray on which are a siphon of soda-water and some tumblers. She remains there as motionless as a statue till the thunder subsides and then advances softly to the farther end of the refectory-table.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Setting the tray on the table—to* HILLGROVE.] You guessed there'd be a storm, sir——

LAURA.

[*Startled at discovering that* MRS. MINNETT *is in the room.*] Ah——!

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] You were right.

[OLIVER *places* LAURA *in the chair on the right of the round table and turns away to the dresser.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* LAURA.] Don't be nervous, ma'am. That's the worst crash you'll hear to-night. [*Withdrawing.*] It's passing over us. It's passing over us. [*Out of sight.*] It's passing over us.

[OLIVER *has opened a drawer in the dresser and taken out a decanter of whisky. He now tiptoes into the entrance hall and looks along the passage towards the kitchen. Again a flash of lightning is seen through the curtains.*]

OLIVER.

[*Coming to the refectory-table and putting the decanter on the tray—in a whisper.*] She's gone.

[*Once more the thunder peals, but a little farther off, as* HILLGROVE *gets to his feet.*]

HILLGROVE.

[*Groping across the room to* LAURA.] Mrs. Bashforth——

LAURA.

[*Weakly.*] Oh, how silly I am! Forgive me, Major Hillgrove.

HILLGROVE.

Mrs. Bashforth, you ask for my advice—[OLIVER *comes to him and guides him by touching his arm.*]

you and your husband. [*Firmly.*] Listen to me, both of you. [*In a low, earnest voice.*] Put out of your heads your foolish suspicion of this poor, half-crazy woman; put it out of your heads completely. [*To* OLIVER.] Bashforth——

OLIVER.

Oh, as for me, I've told you the notion's entirely Laura's. The idea would never have struck *me.*

LAURA.

Oliver, you sneak! [*To* HILLGROVE.] You put it *into* my head, Major Hillgrove. You're to blame.

HILLGROVE.

Yes, the blame's mine. It was stupid of me—unfeeling—to amuse myself by weaving a fanciful—an evil—romance out of what I heard from Wisborough in idle talk. I regret it.

OLIVER.

[*Thoughtfully, knitting his brows.*] Even the Step—my stepfather—said she reminded him of one of the witches in—whatd'yecallit?——

[*There is a final roll of thunder in the distance.*]

LAURA.

[*Rising.*] In "Macbeth." [*Through the growl of the thunder.*] "The weird sisters hand in hand—"

[*Waving her arms in mimicry and croaking.*] "When shall we three meet again In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" [*Laughing feebly.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha——!

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] If it isn't Mrs. Minnett, what *is* it? There must be *some* explanation.

LAURA.

There must be *some* explanation.

OLIVER.

[*Desperately.*] If you could only *see* us, Hillgrove——!

LAURA.

If you could only *see* us!

OLIVER.

You do *hear* the difference in us, don't you?

LAURA.

You do *hear* the difference?

HILLGROVE.

[*Inclining his head solemnly.*] I hear.

OLIVER.

Very well, then——!

LAURA.

Very well, then——!

HILLGROVE.

Very well, then, I say take the gift, and enjoy it, without question. [*Forcibly.*] Take it without question, and without apprehension that you will ever be robbed of it. Accept it humbly as a heaven-sent miracle, and thank God for it on your bended knees.

LAURA.

[*Partly in awe, partly in incredulity.*] A heaven-sent miracle?

OLIVER.

[*In the same tone.*] Why, do you think——?

HILLGROVE.

Think! I know. I *know.* [*Raising himself to his full height and drawing a deep breath.*] I, too, am waiting.

LAURA.

[*After a short silence, taking his hand with extreme gentleness.*] Dear Major Hillgrove——

OLIVER.

[*Taking his other hand.*] Dear old chap—

HILLGROVE.

[*Suddenly breaking into a cheery laugh.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha! [*Gaily.*] Is it still raining? [*As* OLIVER *goes to the front-door and opens it.*] I promised Wisborough I'd smoke a pipe with him before bed-time.

OLIVER.

[*Looking into the darkness.*] No; it's stopped. [*Leaving the door open and coming to the farther end of the refectory-table.*] Drink to our happiness, Hillgrove, before you turn out.

HILLGROVE.

Indeed I will. [*Moving towards* OLIVER, *steered by* LAURA.] Not too fiery, though.

OLIVER.

[*Mixing a whisky-and-soda.*] Hillgrove——

HILLGROVE.

Hullo?

OLIVER.

My mother and Rupert—the Step—are coming down to-morrow, to inspect Laura. I wish to goodness you'd be here.

HILLGROVE.

I?

LAURA.

Ah, yes!

OLIVER.

Three o'clock they're due. [*To* LAURA.] And we'll ask the Rector and Mrs. Corsellis. It may curb the mater's exuberance if she finds us fenced in by a crowd.

LAURA.

[*In trepidation.*] The Rector—— ?

OLIVER.

We can trust the Corsellises to hold their tongues till we've decided on a line of action. [*To* HILLGROVE, *handing him his drink.*] You'll come ?

HILLGROVE.

Have you told your people—— ?

OLIVER.

[*Shaking his head.*] No. [*Gloomily.*] And the fun of it is that when I wrote to them the day before my marriage I informed 'em I'd deliberately selected a wife who was—who was——

LAURA.

[*Merrily.*] Absolutely repellent.

OLIVER.

Who wasn't outwardly attractive, at any rate.

LAURA.

Ha, ha, ha! But who could be relied upon to nurse and coddle a sick man!

OLIVER.

[*Distractedly.*] Oh! Oh, the position's unique, Hillgrove!

HILLGROVE.

Well, I'll be with you to-morrow, if you think my presence will make things easier for you——

LAURA.

Oh, thank you, Major Hillgrove!

OLIVER.

Good egg!

HILLGROVE.

[*Raising his glass.*] Here's to you, my children! [*He drinks.*] You've given me the biggest startler I've ever had in my life. [*He drinks again.*] I sha'n't sleep a wink to-night; not a single wink. [*He drains his glass.*] Now I'll be off. [*Returning the glass to* OLIVER.] My traps—[OLIVER *replaces the glass on the tray and he and* LAURA *help* HILLGROVE

into his cape. They all move to the middle of the room.] Phiou! I should dearly like to impart these strange happenings to Eddie Wisborough. But, of course, I won't breathe a syllable on the subject. [*Putting on his gloves.*] How excited he'd be! How——! [*A thought striking him.*] By-the-bye, Mrs. Bashforth—and you, Bashforth—whether you stick to Fittlehurst or not, don't omit to preserve a tradition by scratching your names on one of the panes of the window in this room. You mustn't forget that!

OLIVER.

Scratch our names——?

LAURA.

On the window——?

HILLGROVE.

You've noticed the string of names scratched there?

OLIVER.

Yes.

LAURA.

Yes.

HILLGROVE.

They are the names of your predecessors—young men and women who have spent their honeymoons within these walls for generations back. This hasn't always been a cottage, I dare say you've heard.

LAURA.

No; I've heard it was once a much larger house—a mansion.

HILLGROVE.

The dower-house of the Wisboroughs. It was ravaged by fire years ago and never wholly restored. Eddie Wisborough's father made a cottage of the remains.

OLIVER.

I remember—I remember Beesley—Wisborough's agent—telling me——

HILLGROVE.

There are plenty of traces of its former grandeur, if you look for 'em. [*Gesturing vaguely.*] The mullioned window belonged to the original building, and the fireplace, and some of the timbers.

LAURA.

[*Eagerly.*] And used the old house to be lent to newly-wedded couples——?

HILLGROVE.

[*Nodding.*] From time immemorial; a custom of the family. [OLIVER *goes to the window and, drawing the curtains aside, examines the diamond-shaped panes.*] An appropriate spot, this, Mrs. Bashforth, for what has occurred to you and your husband!

LAURA.

[*Glowingly.*] Ah——!

HILLGROVE.

Just imagine the wealth of manly grace and girlish beauty this ancient casket has held in its day——!

OLIVER.

[*Deciphering the writing on the window.*] Here's a Ralph—and an Eleanor——

HILLGROVE.

And the low, sweet utterances it has hearkened to, hey!

OLIVER.

And an Edward—and Margaret—and John—and Charlotte——

HILLGROVE.

[*To* LAURA.] Get hold of Rigg for me, will you?

[LAURA *runs to the bell-push, which is beside the fireplace, and presses it, as* OLIVER *leaves the window and brings* HILLGROVE *his cap and stick.*]

OLIVER.

[*Giving* HILLGROVE *his cap.*] Three o'clock tomorrow?

HILLGROVE.

[*Putting on his cap.*] Three o'clock.

OLIVER.

[*Giving him his stick.*] Earlier, if you can manage it.

LAURA.

[*At* HILLGROVE'S *side again.*] In case the Corsellises should be late! Don't let us be alone by any chance when Mr. and Mrs. Smallwood arrive!

[MRS. MINNETT *appears at the mouth of the passage. Hearing her footfall,* OLIVER *and* LAURA *involuntarily shrink into themselves.*]

OLIVER.

[*Not turning.*] Major Hillgrove is ready, Mrs. Minnett.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Vanishing.*] I'll send Mr. Rigg, sir.

OLIVER.

[*Shaking hands with* HILLGROVE.] Good night, Hillgrove. Thanks awfully.

HILLGROVE.

Good night.

LAURA.

[*Shaking hands with* HILLGROVE.] Good night, Major Hillgrove. We're so grateful to you for your kindness to us.

HILLGROVE.

Good night, Mrs. Bashforth——

LAURA.

[*Softly.*] Laura——

HILLGROVE.

Good night, Laura. [*Smiling.*] Pleasant dreams to you, while I am lying awake. May cherubs guard your pillow!

[RIGG *enters from the passage and comes smartly to* HILLGROVE. *To avoid being observed,* OLIVER *turns hastily to the window and redraws the curtains, while* LAURA, *her back to* RIGG, *busies herself with putting her needlework into her work-bag.*]

RIGG.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Here, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Home, Rigg.

RIGG.

Yessir. [*Having put on his cap, he produces an electric torch from his pocket and switches on the light; then he offers his arm to* HILLGROVE.] My arm, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Moving with* RIGG *to the front-door.*] Quite a sharp storm, Rigg.

RIGG.

Very, sir. Clear the air, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*To* LAURA *and* OLIVER.] Good night again!

LAURA.

Good night, Major Hillgrove.

OLIVER.

Good night.

RIGG.

[*At the door—to* LAURA *and* OLIVER.] Good night, ma'am. Good night, sir.

LAURA.

Good night.

OLIVER.

Good night.

[*Immediately* HILLGROVE *and* RIGG *have disappeared,* LAURA *and* OLIVER *run to the front-door and call after them.*]

LAURA.

Mind the mounting-block in the drive, Rigg.

RIGG.

[*Out of sight.*] Right you are, ma'am!

OLIVER.

And the ditch on the left of the road.

RIGG.

[*Farther away.*] Thank'ee; I've got a light, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*In the distance.*] Who-o-o-op!

LAURA.

Who-o-o-op!

OLIVER.

Who-o-o-op!

LAURA.

[*Leaving the door and coming forward.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha——!

[*Her laughter dies out as* OLIVER *shuts the door and joins her. They stand facing each other for a while doubtfully.*]

OLIVER.

Well, ol' lady?

LAURA.

Well, dearest ?

OLIVER.

Blest if Hillgrove has made matters much clearer to *me !*

LAURA.

[*Wistfully.*] You don't believe in his theory——?

OLIVER.

A heaven-sent miracle ?

LAURA.

You don't believe in it.

OLIVER.

Do *you ?*

LAURA.

[*Raising and dropping her hands.*] I'm puzzled *what* to believe.

OLIVER.

And I. [*A pause.*] And I.

LAURA.

[*After a fearful glance in the direction of the kitchen.*] Anyhow, whether our transmogrification is the result of witchcraft or is a gracious act of Providence, it is equally a miracle.

OLIVER.

True; true.

LAURA.

[*Creeping nearer to him.*] So, for the peace of our souls, shall we agree to do as Major Hillgrove counsels us—accept the gift in a cheerful spirit ?

OLIVER.

Jolly well enjoy it ?

LAURA.

Enjoy it; revel in it; above all, cease worrying bout what is beyond our ken.

OLIVER.

Yes; I suppose we'd better let it go at that.

LAURA.

[*Laying her head upon his breast.*] Yes, yes, yes, let it go at that. [*He folds her to him and their lips meet in a lingering kiss.*] Oh, my love ! My love !

OLIVER.

[*In a fond murmur.*] My love !

LAURA.

[*Releasing herself.*] Ah! Ah! [*Her arms uplifted.*] "Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,

Before we two into the Dust descend;——!" [*To* OLIVER.] Omar.

OLIVER.

[*Elevating his eyebrows.*] Who's he ?

LAURA.

[*Skipping to the refectory-table and mixing a drink for* OLIVER.] A pagan gentleman who approves of your having a stiff drink for a night-cap. [*Blithely.*] Oliver !

OLIVER.

[*Going to the small table near the left-hand corner of the room and loading a pipe.*] Eh ?

LAURA.

Oh, Oliver, I want to be married all over again !

OLIVER.

Good lord ! What for ?

LAURA.

Not in an almost empty church, you goose, with my stolid old landlady and her husband as witnesses and Mrs. Corsellis as sole spectator! Now that I am beautiful and you are handsome, I want to have a grand wedding, with a bevy of bridesmaids, and a page to carry my tail, and a best man for you, and a

heap of guests in the pews craning their necks to catch a glimpse of us.

OLIVER.

[*Lighting his pipe.*] Much obliged, I'm sure.

LAURA.

[*Leaving the table, the tumbler in her hand.*] And I want to be married by a bishop—a grave, portly bishop in lawn sleeves and all the rest of it; the bishop of Anywhere-you-please, assisted—merely assisted—by the Reverend Charles Corsellis, Rector of Fittlehurst.

OLIVER.

[*Coming to her, smoking his pipe contentedly.*] Anything else?

LAURA.

[*Taking a sip from the tumbler, making a wry face, and then giving the glass to* OLIVER.] Certainly. I want to wear a dress of ivory satin charmeuse with a train of white and silver brocade lined with silver tissue, and a Honiton-lace veil, and a magnificent pearl necklet, a present from the bridegroom——

OLIVER.

Ha, ha, ha! [*Drinking.*] Cat!

LAURA.

And to carry a bouquet of white carnations and lilies of the valley; the hugest bouquet ever seen! [*Going to the window and holding the curtains apart.*] Oliver, I wonder, if the shades of these poor departed lovers could revisit the scene of their happiness—I wonder what they would think of *us!* Would they smile benignly on us, or would they shake their sides and grin and mock?

OLIVER.

[*Finishing his drink and putting the empty glass on the round table.*] Mock? Why should they mock?

LAURA.

[*Gazing at the window-panes steadily.*] "Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie, Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and sans End!"

OLIVER.

[*Turning out the light of the lamp on the round table.*] Shut up, Laura!

LAURA.

[*Half-curtsying to the window.*] Good-night, Ralph and Eleanor—and Margaret—and every one of you! I do hope you consider Oliver and me worthy to fill your places.

OLIVER.

[*Going to the front-door.*] You'll have a horrible nightmare, if you're not careful.

LAURA.

[*Dropping the curtains with a laugh and a shiver.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha—— !

[*She picks up the decanter and goes with it to the dresser as* OLIVER *turns the key in the lock and fumbles for the chain.*]

OLIVER.

[*Rattling the chain.*] It wouldn't do for you to have tired eyes to-morrow, sweetheart.

LAURA.

[*Putting the decanter back into the dresser-drawer.*] Ugh ! To-morrow ! How I dread the ordeal ! I dread it !

OLIVER.

Soon be over. [*Securing the chain.*] And you're bound to captivate 'em, after they've recovered from the shock of their astonishment; [*bolting the door*] bound to.

LAURA.

[*Shutting the drawer and gathering up her hat, veil, and cloak from the chair behind the round table—with*

a twinkle.] Will your stepfather slaughter any more fowls on his way down, Oliver ?

OLIVER.

[*Turning out the light of the lamp on the writing-table.*] Highly probable. He, he ! Depends on whether he drives the blessed old car himself. [*Going to the table in the entrance hall and lighting the two candles.*] I say, Laura !

LAURA.

Yes, my man ?

OLIVER.

[*Still smoking.*] When the mater discovers she has a daughter-in-law she can be proud of, shouldn't be surprised if she's keener than ever on getting me back to London.

LAURA.

[*Moving to the right, tremulously.*] Oh, Oliver !

OLIVER.

Bet you ! [*Lighting the second candle.*] And come to think of it, we *should* be wasting our sweetness on the desert air here, shouldn't we ?

LAURA.

[*In a quiver.*] Oh, but I haven't the manner—the style—of a London woman, Olly; never could acquire it !

OLIVER.

[*Turning out the light of the lamp on the table.*] Trust not. *Your* charm lies in your freshness—freedom from rotten affectations. [*Coming to her, pipe in mouth, carrying the two candlesticks.*] Combined with your beauty, ol' lady, the novelty of you would be irresistible.

LAURA.

[*Taking one of the candlesticks from him.*] We—we won't talk about it to-night. It—it's agitating.

OLIVER.

[*Removing his pipe and gazing at her ardently.*] No; in the morning—early——

LAURA.

When we first wake——

OLIVER.

When the sun streams into the room and the birds are busy——

LAURA.

That's the time for talking.

[*There is a short silence, during which they contemplate the wicks of their candles.*]

OLIVER.

[*Stirring himself.*] Ready ?

LAURA.

Yes.

[*They go to the staircase and, side by side, slowly ascend the stairs and disappear, leaving both the entrance hall and the inner hall in total darkness. A minute or so elapses and then* MRS. MINNETT, *with catlike steps and furtive movements, enters from the passage, carrying a lighted candle in a flat candlestick. After a searching look round, she stands her candlestick on the writing-table and, putting her hand through the division of the window-curtains, satisfies herself that the casements are fastened. This done, she takes up the candlestick and goes to the front-door, where she is heard trying the lock, chain, and bolt. Finally, she, too, slowly ascends the stairs, and again there is complete darkness and stillness lasting an appreciable time. Then, all of a sudden, a number of tiny specks of light, resembling stars, gleam and flicker on the walls, and in a little while the air becomes filled with the strains of languorous music, and gradually every-*

thing is suffused with the misty pallor of dream-land, and one by one the stars fade and expire.

Presently, without a sound, the front-door swings open and, after a pause, a handsome young man and woman, richly apparelled in the dress of the Tudor period, enter loiteringly and lovingly. When they reach the centre of the arch they separate, she, with her head bent, coming to the round table and toying with LAURA'S *work-bag, he going to the door and, with a clatter, locking, chaining, and bolting it. Returning to her, he touches her lightly upon the shoulder, and in response she raises her lips to his and they embrace passionately. Then, his arm encircling her waist, they walk to the staircase, and they also ascend the stairs and disappear.*

The music now changes to a livelier note and again the door opens noiselessly. A rosy-cheeked, ringleted young woman darts in from the garden pursued by a young man. They are in the dress of the reign of Charles II, and are a gallant-looking pair. Her arms are laden with flowers and, as she flees from him laughingly, she bombards him with the blossoms. She dodges him from behind the settee, then

from behind the refectory-table ; but ultimately he overtakes and seizes her, and, panting, she yields her lips to his. Then, exhausted by the struggle, their arms linked and their heads close together, they, too, slowly go up the stairs and pass out of sight.

Scarcely have they vanished when another couple enter—this time a mere boy and girl in the dress of 1830 *or thereabouts. The girl is pretty, fresh-coloured, and demure, the boy awkward and sheepish ; each is shy of the other. With downcast eyes they wander about aimlessly until it strikes the boy to remove a ring from his finger and to go to the window. The curtains fly apart at his approach, and, kneeling on the window-seat, he proceeds to scrawl upon one of the panes with the stone of his ring. The girl watches him for a while and then, impelled by curiosity, creeps to his side. Finding her there, he summons up courage to kiss her brow ; whereat, startled and affronted, she moves away quickly. With a scared face, he hurries to her —the curtains closing of their own accord as he leaves the window—and they meet at the foot of the staircase. Forbidding him by a*

prim gesture to accompany her, she ascends the stairs alone; but, after a moment of irresolution, he follows her, and they also pass out of sight.

As they disappear, the music again changes its character, and the lid of the oaken coffer rises and out of the chest swarm a troop of bare-limbed children winged like cherubs. Joining hands, they dance in a circle gleefully; after which they scamper up the stairs as fast as their little legs will carry them. Then the light darkens to a bluish haze and the interior of the fireplace is illumined by a red glow, and a batch of agile, dwarfish creatures with long, pointed ears and evil faces topple down the chimney. Scurrying hither and thither, they play all sorts of impish tricks, rolling over the settee, leaping on to the chairs and tables, rummaging LAURA'S *work-bag and scattering its contents, and monkeying with the objects on the dresser. They are interrupted in their gambols by a rumble of thunder, and at that they huddle together and, stealing to the mouth of the passage, peer expectantly in the direction of the kitchen.*

There is a flash of lightning in the passage

as MRS. MINNETT, *in the traditional garb of Mother Shipton—the "scarlet cloak and steeple-hat" described by* HILLGROVE *in his talk with* LAURA *in the First Act—rides in on a broom-stick. Followed by the little people, she careers round and round; and then the thunder increases and two bearded hags, "so withered, and so wild in their attire," spring from between the window-curtains.* MRS. MINNETT *hails them with a screech of delight and the three gather about the refectory-table, the little people eyeing their proceedings gloatingly from a distance. The flowers in the bowl on the table burst into flame as* MRS. MINNETT *casts an invisible substance into the bowl.*]

THE THREE WITCHES.

[*Together.*]

"Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble."

[*The music changes abruptly to a melody which is half tender, half triumphant, and the witches, "each at once her choppy finger laying upon her skinny lips," start and listen. Then the light resumes its pale glamour and the witches, discomfited, scuttle away swiftly along the passage, while the little people retreat in con-*

fusion to the fireplace, where they vanish. Very soon there is a stir upon the staircase, and down the stairs, preceded by some of the cherubs and followed by the rest, one of whom acts as train-bearer, comes LAURA *in the wedding-dress of ivory satin charmeuse with the train of white and silver brocade, and wearing the Honiton-lace veil and the pearl necklet, and carrying the bouquet of white carnations and lilies of the valley—"the hugest bouquet ever seen." Three exceedingly pretty bridesmaids complete the procession, and all advance into the inner hall. There the cherubs —with the exception of the cherub who is holding the train—perform another little dance; after which, leaving the train-bearer behind them, they run to the oaken coffer and clamber into it and disappear. At that moment a fourth bridesmaid, dressed like the others, enters at the front-door and walks majestically to* LAURA *—a tall girl with a nose as monstrous and as grotesque as Cyrano de Bergerac's.*]

THE GIRL.

[*To* LAURA.] Sorry I'm late; but my father *would* drive the car.

LAURA.

[*Staring at her open-mouthed.*] It's very kind of you to be one of my bridesmaids, Ethel.

THE GIRL.

[*Chillingly.*] You are looking at my nose?

LAURA.

Ye-e-es.

THE GIRL.

[*Sniffing.*] Everybody *does.* [*Joining the other bridesmaids.*] A large nose is a sign of high intelligence.

[MRS. SMALLWOOD, *very smartly gowned, enters at the front-door.* SMALLWOOD, *in a frock-coat, white waistcoat, lavender trousers, and lemon-coloured gloves, and with an enormous camellia in his button-hole, follows her. He is carrying, with their heads downward, the corpses of three fowls.* MRS. SMALLWOOD *goes to* LAURA *and kisses her with great* empressement.]

LAURA.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *eagerly.*] You think I'm beautiful?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Perfectly—[*joining the bridesmaids*] perfectly beautiful.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Coming to* LAURA *and, with a stately bow, presenting her with the fowls.*] Pray accept these as a token of affection and good will.

LAURA.

[*Handing her bouquet to one of the bridesmaids.*] Oh! [*Taking the fowls from* SMALLWOOD.] Thank you; they are charming. [*In the same tone as to* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] You think I am beautiful?

SMALLWOOD.

More—[*joining* MRS. SMALLWOOD *and the bridesmaids*] more than beautiful.

[LAURA *consigns the fowls to another of the bridesmaids as* MRS. CORSELLIS, *in rich silk and furbelows, enters at the front-door. She is followed by her seven children—three boys and four girls of varying heights—and, after a short interval, by* CORSELLIS. *The latter is robed as a bishop.* MRS. CORSELLIS *comes to* LAURA *and kisses her.*]

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*With a mixture of dignity and condescension.*] What a superb day for your wedding, dear Laura!

LAURA.

[*As before.*] You think I'm beautiful?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

The virtuous are always beautiful, my child.

[*Marshalling her children in front of her, she turns away and enthrones herself in the chair at the nearer end of the refectory-table. The children range themselves solemnly on the right of the table as* CORSELLIS *advances to* LAURA.]

LAURA.

[*Viewing* CORSELLIS *with mingled awe and gratification.*] Oh, Rector—I mean, my lord! I'm *so* glad they've made you a bishop!

CORSELLIS.

[*After a glance at his offspring—tapping upon his teeth.*] M'yes, there will be less difficulty about the children's boots and shoes now.

LAURA.

Do you—do you admire my beauty?

CORSELLIS.

[*Regarding her with an expressionless face.*] Eh? Oh, certainly. [*Putting his finger-tips together.*] But, though we ought not to despise external comeliness, we must beware of ranking it above the more abiding gifts of disposition and character.

[*Folding his hands on his stomach, he walks with measured tread to where the* SMALLWOODS *and the bridesmaids are congregated. As* CORSELLIS *moves away from* LAURA, HILLGROVE *enters at the front-door with a firm, confident step. He is in khaki, with the ribbons of his orders on his breast, and his eyes are large and brilliant. He comes to* LAURA *and, after saluting her in military fashion, raises her hand to his lips.*]

LAURA.

[*Beaming upon him.*] Oh, Major Hillgrove, I *am* pleased that you can see! [*He bows to her smilingly.*] Don't you think I am very, *very* beautiful? [*He bows again.*] Far, far beyond what you imagined me to be when you could only *hear?*

[*He gives her another bow and makes way for* OLIVER, *who strides in at that moment.* OLIVER

also is in khaki, but his clothes are soiled and ragged, his boots heavily caked with mud, and his handsome face is burnt to brick-colour. He goes straight to LAURA *and stands before her.*]

LAURA.

[*Gazing at him as though he were a stranger.*] You have just come from the trenches ?

OLIVER.

[*Nodding.*] Yes.

LAURA.

That muffler round your neck—does it comfort you ?

OLIVER.

[*Nodding.*] Yes.

LAURA.

It's one *I* have knitted and sent out.

OLIVER.

God bless you.

LAURA.

[*Gently stroking the muffler.*] Through the dreary nights and the long watches, do you ever conjure up pictures of fair women ?

OLIVER.

Sometimes

LAURA.

Have you ever pictured one fairer than I ?

OLIVER.

[*Shaking his head.*] Never.

LAURA.

You may marry me, if you like. [*Displaying her dress.*] I am quite ready, as you perceive. Go home and change your clothes, and we'll meet at the church. [*Proffering her cheek.*] Kiss me.

[*The music becomes loud and turbulent as he draws her to him and kisses her, and immediately there is a tremendous clap of thunder and a thick murk envelops everything and everybody. Lightning flashes again and again from different parts of the entrance hall and the inner hall, and again, intermittently, the red glow shines in the fireplace and the flowers flame in the bowl on the refectory-table. Stumbling down the stairs in wild terror come the three pairs of lovers, and the cherubs issue panic-stricken from the oaken chest. The lovers make their escape, but the others, like people in a burning building who have lost their bearings, move about frantically, the seven children clinging to their mother, the bridesmaids to* CORSELLIS *and* MR. *and* MRS. SMALLWOOD. *At length* HILLGROVE, *uttering*

a cry of triumph, finds the front-door. Feeling his way blindly, OLIVER *half leads, half carries,* LAURA *to the door, and helter-skelter the rest follow. Then a still denser fog-cloud descends, obscuring the entrance hall completely, and the three witches bound in from the fire-place, the impish dwarfs at their heels. Surrounded by the imps, the witches dance and caper exultingly, ending by rushing to the window and leaping through the curtains, the imps after them. Then once more the music softens, and one by one the stars reappear and twinkle, and by-and-by there is a bright rift in the fog-cloud through which is seen a vision of a gleaming-white bed; and* LAURA *and* OLIVER *are lying in it fast asleep, locked in each other's arms.*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

ETERNAL TRUTH

The scene is the same; the time, afternoon. Sunlight pours in at the window. The front-door is closed. The flower-bowls are in their original places and LAURA'S *work-bag is still on the round table.*

[*As at the beginning of the previous Act, there is nobody in the inner hall or the entrance hall, and again, after a while, the front-door bell is heard to ring and* MRS. MINNETT, *in her black dress and white apron, comes into the entrance hall from the passage and opens the door, to find* HILLGROVE *and* RIGG *on the door-step.* MRS. MINNETT'S *movements are now extremely drooping and feeble; she appears to be almost at the point of collapse.*]

RIGG.

[*Outside.*] Good afternoon, ma'am.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Faintly.*] Good afternoon, Mr. Rigg.

HILLGROVE.

Ah, Mrs. Minnett! Splendid weather!

MRS. MINNETT.

It is indeed, sir. [*Shrinking against the wall so that the two men may pass her.*] Please—please come in and sit down. [HILLGROVE *and* RIGG *enter and advance into the inner hall and* MRS. MINNETT *closes the door.*] Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth are upstairs, sir; [*going with dragging feet to the staircase*] I—I'll let them know you're here.

HILLGROVE.

[*As she labours up the stairs—taking off his gloves.*] Thank you; thank you.

RIGG.

[*Who has been eyeing* MRS. MINNETT *curiously—to* HILLGROVE, *when she is out of sight.*] That good lady doesn't seem to be quite up to the mark to-day, sir.

HILLGROVE.

No; she sounds rather out of sorts, poor thing. [*Putting his gloves into his pocket.*] More so than usual.

RIGG.

[*Conducting* HILLGROVE *to the settee.*] Sofa, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Tapping the settee with his stick.*] I don't think you need wait for me, Rigg.

RIGG.

Very good, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Seating himself.*] Come back at four o'clock or a little later and hang about in the garden.

RIGG.

Cert'nly, sir. [*Receiving* HILLGROVE'S *hat and stick from him and laying them on the round table.*] That'll just give me time to have another go at sharpening them razor-blades, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Dabbing his forehead with his handkerchief.*] Yes; and don't cut those precious fingers of yours as you did on the last occasion. You haven't too many of them.

RIGG.

[*Returning to the front-door—grinning.*] Try not to, sir. [*To* MRS. MINNETT, *who, clutching the banisters, is descending the stairs.*] I'm coming back later on, ma'am.

MRS. MINNETT.

All right, Mr. Rigg. [RIGG *departs, shutting the door after him, and* MRS. MINNETT *advances to* HILLGROVE.] Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth will be down directly, sir. [*He nods.*] She's putting on another of her brand-new frocks, in honour of her company. [*Wailingly.*] The last of the smart frocks she had made at Petborough before her marriage!

HILLGROVE.

[*Smiling.*] Ah, no woman is content, Mrs. Minnett, as long as she has an unworn dress in her wardrobe!

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Wringing her hands.*] If she did but know it, she'd look just as well in one of the gowns she used to run about the village in, doing kindnesses to the old and the sick. She'd look just as well in one of her ordinary gowns.

HILLGROVE.

Why, that applies to any pretty woman, Mrs. Minnett. [*With a change of tone, lowering his voice.*] Er—come nearer; I want to speak to you.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Obeying him.*] Y-yes, sir?

HILLGROVE.

[*In a whisper.*] You have eyes in your head, Mrs. Minnett. You must have *noticed*. [*With zest.*] Tell me—leaving her dress out of the question—how *is* Mrs. Bashforth looking this afternoon? Brilliant? Eh? And Mr. Bashforth—— ?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Clasping her temples and feigning a laugh.*] He he, he! Oh, you oughtn't to ask *me*, sir. I'm only a servant, and it's not my place to take notice or pass remarks.

HILLGROVE.

Not to Tom, Dick, or Harry; but——

MRS. MINNETT.

I—I beg pardon for saying as much as I *have* said. I—[*stiffening herself suddenly and listening*] Ssh! They're coming! [*Going swiftly but totteringly to the mouth of the passage.*] They're coming!

[*She disappears and presently* LAURA *and* OLIVER *hurry down the stairs.* LAURA *presents an enchanting figure in her new frock, simple and inexpensive as it is, while* OLIVER—*who is also in his best bib and tucker—is even handsomer and more stalwart*

than before. LAURA *rushes to* HILLGROVE, *who gets to his feet, and seizes his hands.*]

LAURA.

Dear Major Hillgrove!

OLIVER.

[*Grumblingly.*] Thought you'd forgotten us, old chap!

HILLGROVE.

Am I late?

LAURA.

Disgracefully.

OLIVER.

[*Glancing at the clock.*] Our crowd's due at three; it's nearly that now.

HILLGROVE.

Peccavi! [*Reseating himself.*] Wisborough had some people to lunch; I couldn't get away.

LAURA.

[*To* OLIVER.] Lock the front-door, Oliver. [OLIVER *runs to the door and turns the key in the lock.*] We don't want to be caught.

OLIVER.

By Jove, no! You start instructing Hillgrove, Laura.

LAURA.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Oliver and I have a plan, Major Hillgrove. We so hope you'll fall in with it.

HILLGROVE.

A plan——?

LAURA.

It's this:—

OLIVER.

[*Who has returned to the inner hall.*] It's Laura's idea; she suggested it.

LAURA.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] We want *you* to explain to Oliver's mother and stepfather, and to Mr. and Mrs. Corsellis, exactly what has happened to us.

OLIVER.

The miracle, Hillgrove; we want *you* to describe it.

HILLGROVE.

[*Somewhat staggered.*] Me?

LAURA.

While we are waiting upstairs ready to be summoned. [*Sitting in the chair on the right of the round table.*] Oh, do, Major Hillgrove!

OLIVER.

[*Sitting in the chair on the left of the refectory-table*]
Pray oblige us; there's a good fellow.

LAURA.

The fact is—we don't mind confessing it to *you*—

OLIVER.

We're nervous.

LAURA.

Shockingly.

OLIVER.

Agitated.

LAURA.

My heart's beating a thousand to the minute.

OLIVER.

In any event there's bound to be a scene of excitement and flurry—we recognize *that*——

LAURA.

But if they were all prepared for the revelation—if it was led *up* to——

OLIVER.

If the edge could be taken off their surprise, as it were,——

LAURA.

It would save us a little of the—the——

OLIVER.

The uncomfortableness.

LAURA.

The embarrassment; a tiny bit.

OLIVER.

[*Looking at* HILLGROVE.] What's the verdict? You'll do it?

LAURA.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Like the friend you've proved yourself to be!

OLIVER.

You'll take the job on, Hillgrove?

HILLGROVE.

[*Mopping his brow again.*] Phew!

LAURA.

It'll have to be most carefully done.

OLIVER.

Not blurted out, of course.

LAURA.

[*To* OLIVER.] As if Major Hillgrove *would*, Oliver!

OLIVER.

[*Waving a hand.*] I merely mentioned——

LAURA.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Our proposal is that Oliver and I should retire upstairs at once——

OLIVER.

And shut ourselves in a bedroom——

LAURA.

Where we couldn't hear anything of what's going on down below——

OLIVER.

Not a blooming sound——

HILLGROVE.

[*Dryly.*] Yes, yes, yes, I've already grasped that part of the scheme—your scuttering into your burrows like a couple of rabbits and leaving me to face the music. That's perfectly clear!

OLIVER.

Dash it, Hillgrove, don't be rough on us! Con*found* it——!

LAURA.

[*To* OLIVER.] Ssh, ssh! Olly—Olly——!

OLIVER.

'Tisn't as though I was asking a favour entirely for myself!

LAURA.

Oliver——!

OLIVER.

Damned ungracious, *I* call it.

LAURA.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] No, no——

OLIVER.

If Hillgrove were in a similar position——

LAURA.

[*Her mouth quivering.*] If Major Hillgrove were similarly placed, Oliver, probably *we* should hesitate to—to—[*searching for her handkerchief*] oh, how stupid I am!——

OLIVER.

[*Rising and hastening to* LAURA.] Heavens, darling, you mustn't cry! You'll disfigure yourself!

HILLGROVE.

[*Penitently.*] Oh, my dear Mrs. Bashforth——!

OLIVER.

[*Glaring at* HILLGROVE.] *Now* I hope you're satisfied, Hillgrove!

HILLGROVE.

I'm sorry——

OLIVER.

[*While* LAURA *is blowing her nose.*] If it was your *wish* that my wife should have a red nose on this day of all others——

HILLGROVE.

Sorry. You see, Bashforth—and you, Laura—you see, the difficulty is I'm a complete stranger to Mr. and Mrs.—Smallsomething——

OLIVER.

Wood.

HILLGROVE.

Smallwood—haven't the pleasure of their acquaintance——

LAURA.

[*Winningly, through her tears.*] But you have the pleasure of *our* acquaintance.

OLIVER.

Obviously!

HILLGROVE.

That won't introduce me to them in your absence.

OLIVER.

If the Corsellises arrive first, *they* will introduce you. You know *them.*

LAURA.

And if Mr. and Mrs. Smallwood are the first to arrive, you introduce yourself.

OLIVER.

Why *create* obstacles, dear old man? Why *create* obstacles?

HILLGROVE.

[*Throwing his head back and laughing.*] Ha, ha, ha! P'sh! You two people can twist me round your little finger. I suppose I'd better give in.

LAURA.

Ah! [*Jumping up.*] Ah, you're the sweetest person in the world, Major Hillgrove! You *are.* Don't deny it. [*Tripping away to the window and then to the farther end of the refectory-table.*] Isn't he, Oliver?

OLIVER.

[*Approvingly.*] Yes, there isn't much the matter with Hillgrove.

HILLGROVE.

Ha, ha, ha——!

OLIVER.

[*Laying a hand on* HILLGROVE'S *shoulder.*] You must excuse me for being a trifle huffy with you, old

chap. Lord, no wonder I'm irritable! [*In a fretful tone.*] Mrs. Minnett! On top of everything—bother the woman!—*she's* worrying us afresh!

HILLGROVE.

[*Reverting to his more serious manner.*] Yes, what on earth is wrong with Mrs. Minnett to-day?

LAURA.

[*Advancing and joining* OLIVER—*anxiously.*] I'm afraid she's very ill, Major Hillgrove.

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE, *with an uneasy look.*] What's she been saying to *you*, Hillgrove?

HILLGROVE.

Nothing of importance; but she seems queerer than ever.

OLIVER.

[*Knitting his brows.*] When I announced this morning that my mother and the Step were coming down, I thought she was going to topple over; I did really. [*To* LAURA.] And afterwards, when you went into the kitchen,——?

LAURA.

[*In a hushed voice.*] She was standing by the table shivering, as white as a sheet.

OLIVER.

And when you told her that the Corsellises would be here too—— ?

LAURA.

She stared at me as if I was talking gibberish [*Imitating a gesture of despair.*] And then she raised her arms and walked straight out without a word—into the wood-shed; and there I heard her moaning.

HILLGROVE.

[*Smoothing his hair in a puzzled way.*] Why should Mrs. Minnett be upset because Mr. and Mrs. Smallwood and the Rector and his wife—— ?

OLIVER.

Can't fathom it.

LAURA

If it *is* that.

OLIVER.

[*Moving restlessly to the other side of the room.*] Anyhow, jolly hard lines that *we* should be upset just when we want to be at our best !

LAURA.

Awfully hard lines ! [*Piteously.*] And I had a harrowing dream last night that has fatigued me dreadfully !

HILLGROVE.

[*Soothingly.*] Ssh, ssh, ssh! Don't distress yourselves. Keep calm. [*With conviction.*] You *are* at your best, both of you—you, Laura, in spite of your fatigue, and you, Bashforth.

LAURA.

[*Going to him and seizing his hands again.*] Oh, bless you, Major Hillgrove; bless you! [*All smiles.*] You *hear*, don't you?

OLIVER.

[*Perking up.*] You *hear*, Hillgrove?

HILLGROVE.

Yes, yes, my dears, I hear. [*Nodding.*] I hear.

[*As in the First Act, a motor-horn hoots at a short distance from the house, the hoots growing more emphatic with repetition and ending in a prolonged series of screeches.* OLIVER *and* LAURA *start, and she clutches at him.*]

LAURA.

Oh——!

OLIVER.

The mater and the Step!

LAURA.

[*Flying to the foot of the stairs.*] Come!

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] When you're ready for us, whack the gong—the gong by the front-door. Whack it for all you're worth.

[*He runs after* LAURA *and together they scurry up the stairs. Presently the outer handle of the front-door is turned and rattled as if by somebody desiring to enter, and then there is the sound of the ringing of the door-bell. At first the ringing is almost continuous, and in a few moments* MRS. MINNETT'S *scared face is seen to peep into the inner hall from the mouth of the passage.*]

HILLGROVE.

[*During a lull in the ringing—softly.*] That you, Mrs. Minnett ?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Coming forward and staring about her, astonished at finding* HILLGROVE *alone.*] Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth are upstairs. Don't call them.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Holding her heart.*] Very well, sir.

[*The bell is rung again impatiently.*]

HILLGROVE.

The door's locked. Open it.

[*Like a person in a trance,* MRS. MINNETT *goes to the door and unlocks and opens it.* MRS. SMALLWOOD *is outside, her thumb on the bell-push. She is dressed very much as on the occasion of her previous visit.*]

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Good gracious me, Mrs. Manders, you're not troubled with burglars in these parts, surely! [*Passing* MRS. MINNETT *and sweeping in.*] I should have thought that if there is one spot in the universe that's burglar-proof——! [*Encountering* HILLGROVE, *who rises.*] Oh——!

HILLGROVE.

[*In a gentle voice.*] Mrs. Smallwood, is it?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Gazing at him narrowly.*] Y-y-yes.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Approaching* MRS. SMALLWOOD *and touching her sleeve.*] Major Hillgrove, ma'am. [*Confirming* MRS. SMALLWOOD'S *suspicions by pointing to* HILLGROVE'S *closed lids and then at her own eyes.*] Major Hillgrove —a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth's.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Under her breath, sympathetically.*] Oh, dear; oh, dear!

HILLGROVE.

[*As* MRS. MINNETT, *leaving the front-door open, creeps away along the passage—to* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] A friend and neighbour. [*Brightly.*] Your son and his wife have been kind enough to invite me to meet you and Mr. Smallwood here this afternoon.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Disconcerted.*] D-d-delighted. [*Laying her hand-bag on the refectory-table and taking off her gloves.*] P-p-pray don't stand. [HILLGROVE *resumes his seat as* SMALLWOOD *enters, looking more lugubrious than ever. He is rather taken aback at seeing a stranger.*] My husband. [*Going to* SMALLWOOD *and repeating, with some exaggeration,* MRS. MINNETT'S *pantomime.*] Major Wallgrave—friend of Oliver's—asked to meet us.

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *sotto voce.*] Oh? [*To* HILLGROVE.] Er—how do you do, sir?

HILLGROVE.

[*Cheerily.*] How're you, Mr. Smallwood?

SMALLWOOD.

I am pleased to make your acquaintance.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Throwing her gloves on to the refectory-table and unbuttoning her coat.*] My husband has been very much put out this afternoon, Major.

SMALLWOOD.

Exceedingly.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Getting out of her coat with* SMALLWOOD'S *help.*] Oh, I don't say he is not to blame; I don't say that for one moment. Whenever Mr. Smallwood is to blame I never hesitate to tell him so. [*Unwinding her scarf and giving it to* SMALLWOOD.] Thank you, Rupert. [*Picking up her handbag and advancing to* HILLGROVE.] Since he brought the car down here unassisted a month ago he has developed a craze

—a regular craze—for driving it himself. Cookson —our chauffeur—Cookson's place has become an absolute sinecure. [*Sitting in the chair on the right of the round table.*] And to-day, Colonel—to-day we have killed a dog.

HILLGROVE.

[*Wincing.*] Indeed ?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

With tragic suddenness. [*Opening her handbag.*] A fox-terrier with black spots.

HILLGROVE.

Poor beast !

SMALLWOOD.

[*Who, having deposited* MRS. SMALLWOOD'S *coat, etc., on the chair at the farther end of the refectory-table, is now piling his own outdoor things on the chair on the right of the table.*] The animal bore only the remotest resemblance to a terrier of any description. Grieved as I am to have inflicted pain upon its owner, the town of Godalming is the richer for the loss of such a mongrel.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Powdering her nose.*] The inhabitants weren't of that opinion, evidently. The ferociousness they displayed towards us was most terrifying.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Pacing the room in a state of agitation.*] Bolshevism! Bolshevism! Arrant Bolshevism!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Replacing her powder-puff in her bag and tidying her hair.*] But there, I have been destined all my life to be mixed up with bloodshed in one form or another! Cyril—my first husband—a veritable Nimrod—he once had the misfortune to shoot a boy—peppered I believe is the correct expression——

SMALLWOOD.

[*Raising his hands and groaning.*] Gur-r-r-rh!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Turning to him.*] Eh?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Hastily.*] Yes, yes; peppered, peppered.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

He once peppered a boy in the covers at Kitringham Abbey. Peacock the lad's name was—Ernest Peacock. What a memory I have! [*Shutting her bag.*] Luckily the wounds were superficial, and we afterwards used our influence to procure employment

for him at a trade in which purple indentations in the face are no hindrance to advancement. [MR. *and* MRS. CORSELLIS *are seen in the doorway.*] But has Ernest ever shown the smallest sign of gratitude? Not he! On the contrary, Colonel. On the contrary—— [*Hearing the* CORSELLISES, *who enter, and turning in her chair.*] Oh! Mrs. Cromelli! Vicar!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *testily.*] Corsellis. Corsellis.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Wrapped about her in her cape as before and looking still more invalidish—shaking hands with* SMALLWOOD.] How do you do? [*Tittering.*] He, he, he!

SMALLWOOD.

How are you, madam?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

He, he, he! [*Shaking hands with* MRS. SMALLWOOD, *who has risen, while* SMALLWOOD *shakes hands with* CORSELLIS.] Such a joy to see you again! [*Going to* HILLGROVE, *who also rises, and shaking hands with him.*] Major Hillgrove, too!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Shaking hands with* CORSELLIS, *who comes to her.* Good afternoon.

CORSELLIS.

Good afternoon. [*To* HILLGROVE.] How do you do, Major Hillgrove?

HILLGROVE.

Ha, Rector!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* CORSELLIS—*eyeing* MRS. CORSELLIS *with concern.*] Excuse me: you haven't dragged your wife all the way from Fittlehurst to-day on foot?

CORSELLIS.

No; a worthy soul gave us a lift as far as the cross-roads.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Heaving a sigh of relief.*] So I should hope.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Bashfully.*] He, he, he!

CORSELLIS.

[*Tapping upon his teeth.*] This is—er—h'm—this is positively her last appearance for the present.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS—*taking her arm as* CORSELLIS *wanders away and* HILLGROVE *reseats himself.*] He speaks of you as if you were a popular vocalist! [*Putting her into the chair on the right of the round table.*] For mercy's sake, sit down, dear lady!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Overwhelmed.*] Oh——! He, he, he!

SMALLWOOD.

[*Coming forward.*] This assemblage—if I may venture to say so—is rather an unexpected pleasure.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Joining him.*] Yes; we had no idea that my daughter-in-law was At Home this afternoon to her entire little circle.

SMALLWOOD.

We were under the impression—the distinct impression——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

That our visit was to be a family affair.

SMALLWOOD.

Purely a family affair.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*With a gesture.*] Perhaps, however,——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Faintly.*] Oh, dear; oh, dear! [*Looking for* CORSELLIS.] Charles——!

CORSELLIS.

[*Advancing from behind the round table to the nearer end of the settee.*] My good friends, if our presence here is in the least inopportune——

HILLGROVE.

No, no; no, no.

MR. AND MRS. SMALLWOOD.

No, no——

CORSELLIS.

We are ready to take our departure immediately. [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Eh, Jenny?

HILLGROVE.

Nonsense. Find a chair, Rector.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

I am sure I am equal to walking back to the village.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Heavens above——!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*On the verge of tears.*] I am; I could take it at a leap.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

How easy it is to be misunderstood! I was about to remark that perhaps there is less risk of constraint in a cheery gathering of this sort.

SMALLWOOD.

Precisely. Precisely.

HILLGROVE.

That is what was in your son's mind, Mrs. Smallwood—and in Mrs. Bashforth's—when they invited me and Mr. and Mrs. Corsellis to meet you this afternoon.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Throwing himself into the chair at the nearer end of the refectory-table.*] Precisely.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Sitting in the chair on the left of the refectory-table.*] If Oliver had been here to receive us—as was his duty——

SMALLWOOD.

[*As* CORSELLIS *sits on the edge of the chair on the extreme left.*] Or the young person he has married——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Or the young person he has married—if either had been here to receive us——

SMALLWOOD.

And to explain——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

And to explain—this trifling misapprehension would not, *could* not, have arisen. But how like Oliver!

SMALLWOOD.

Where is he?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

And if it comes to that, how like his father—my first husband—Cyril——!

SMALLWOOD.

Where *is* he?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* SMALLWOOD, *raising her eyebrows.*] Cyril?

SMALLWOOD.

No, no.—Oliver.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

With all his fine qualities, Oliver's father was woefully neglectful of social observances——

HILLGROVE.

Your son is upstairs, Mrs. Smallwood.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Upstairs ?

HILLGROVE.

With Mrs. Bashforth. They are waiting for me to summon them.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Waiting—for you—— ?

SMALLWOOD.

Extraordinary.

HILLGROVE.

They have deputed me to prepare you for a surprise—a great surprise. If you'll be patient with me for a minute or two——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Surprise ?

SMALLWOOD.

[*His hand to his forehead.*] Good God, what is it now!

HILLGROVE.

Mrs. Smallwood, I believe I am right in thinking that your son wrote to you on the eve of his marriage, informing you of the step he was about to take?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Closing her eyes.*] *Wrote* to me——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Yes, yes; yes, yes.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

The bombshell fell upon us as we were starting out to dine with the Ecclestons—the Gordon Ecclestons in Eaton Terrace. How I got through that dinner is a blank. What poor Mr. Chadwick, who took me down—a police magistrate and a most intelligent man—what he thought of me I can't conceive——

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] We are interrupting you, sir. [*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Violet——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] A surprise ?

HILLGROVE.

Don't be alarmed—an agreeable one. Let me tell you what has occurred——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*With sudden alertness.*] You don't mean—she has *money ?*

HILLGROVE.

Money ?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

The girl—— !

HILLGROVE.

Why, no; she had barely enough to scrape along on with decency.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Throwing up her arms in despair.*] Ah—— !

MRS. CORSELLIS.

But her sweet, her charitable, disposition ! Miss Pennington—Mrs. Bashforth that is—possesses virtues, dear Mrs. Smallwood, which are far above rubies. [*To* CORSELLIS.] Charles——

CORSELLIS.

[*Rousing himself.*] Eh? Oh, certainly. Of the vast number of young women it has been my lot to unite in the bonds of matrimony——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Tsch! My son has thrown himself away, Vicar—flung his prospects to the winds. Don't try to persuade *me*—you'll never succeed in doing so——

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] An *agreeable* surprise, sir?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Ha, ha, ha! No money, and unsightly into the bargain! I can quote the words of Oliver's letter. "Darling mother——" I forget how it went. But he admits she has no looks to boast of; and when a man does *that*——!

HILLGROVE.

Stop! That brings us to the point, Mrs. Smallwood——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

The quicker——

SMALLWOOD.

[*Stamping his foot at* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] H'sh, h'sh, h'sh!

HILLGROVE.

[*In measured tones.*] When your son, in his letter to you, described Miss Pennington as being a plain young woman, he was strictly within the truth. In feature and physique she *was* a plain young woman.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Ironically—none of them grasping the significance of his emphasis.*] *Was——!*

HILLGROVE.

This is the course of events. After the simple wedding ceremony they lunched at the rectory with our friends here. [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] That is so, Mrs. Corsellis?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*With a wriggle.*] He, he! Cutlets and a humble gooseberry tart.

CORSELLIS.

[*Groaning.*] Oh-h-h-h——!

HILLGROVE.

[*To* CORSELLIS.] Hey?

CORSELLIS.

[*His head drooping.*] I remember—the children——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

The children were exceptionally naughty during luncheon. Joan and Barbara *would* ask inconvenient questions.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

When *my* children were at a tender age——

HILLGROVE.

They then went for a run in a motor-car which Bashforth hired for the occasion, and shortly before dinner-time, as I gather, he brought his bride home to this cottage.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

For all the world as though he were an agricultural labourer!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Well, sir?

HILLGROVE.

Now please give me your close attention. [*Extending a finger in the direction of the door.*] Picture it! Bashforth and his wife entering at that door,

he the shattered, wry-necked, half-crippled fellow the War had left him, she a little, meagre, wasted thing whose only attraction was her gentle, appealing manner! [*Forcibly.*] You've got that?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Looking from one to the other in resentment.*] Really, I——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE, *heatedly.*] May I ask, sir, without offence, exactly what you are driving at?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Holding her heart.*] Oh, dear——!

CORSELLIS.

[*Shifting in his chair.*] I think that perhaps Jenny and I had better——

HILLGROVE.

Stay where you are, Rector. [*To everybody.*] Listen!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Listen——!

HILLGROVE.

Almost as soon as they had crossed the threshold, the change began. The change *began*. It wasn't

instantaneous; they are both in accord as to its being gradual—that its completion was reached by stages.

SMALLWOOD.

Change ?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Change ?

HILLGROVE.

It is doubtful whether its culmination has even yet been reached. [*Rising and standing at his full height.*] Rector—Mrs. Corsellis—Mr. and Mrs. Smallwood—do any of you believe in miracles ? Modern miracles—miracles that may happen to you, to me, to-day, to-morrow; that may relieve misfortune, retrieve disaster, alter the whole current of our lives; that may heal the sick, make the lame walk, and the blind—the blind !—see ! If not—if you *don't*—an awakening is in store for you, for I tell you that this man and his wife have been touched by a Power which is beyond earthly power and are wonderfully, gloriously transformed.

[*There is a pause of a few seconds, during which the* SMALLWOODS *and the* CORSELLISES *exchange glances, partly of bewilderment, partly of perturbation.*]

SMALLWOOD.

[*Breaking the silence—blinking.*] Transformed ?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

T-t-transformed!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*To* CORSELLIS.] C-C-Charles——?

CORSELLIS.

[*To* HILLGROVE—*stupidly.*] T-t-transformed?

[*With an effort,* MRS. SMALLWOOD *gets to her feet; whereupon* SMALLWOOD *also rises.*]

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] You—you—you—you are mystifying us, Major—Major——

CORSELLIS.

[*Rising.*] Hillgrove——

SMALLWOOD.

I—I—I charge you with mystifying us, sir.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Shamefully.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Stalking across to* HILLGROVE *as* MRS. CORSELLIS *rises and totters to* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Transformed, sir! The pair of them?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Shrilly.*] The pair of them ?

HILLGROVE.

Yes. [*In a firm voice.*] Mrs. Smallwood, your son is no longer the wretched caricature of himself they sent you back from France. When you see him, you'll see again the straight, lissom chap who said good-bye to you at the end of his last leave; you'll find him as handsome as ever and as full of vigour and activity.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Clutching at* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Oh——!

SMALLWOOD.

And—and—and his wife——?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

My—my—my daughter-in-law——?

HILLGROVE.

A beautiful creature. [*Fervently.*] A beautiful creature, with health and strength written in the warm bloom on her cheeks—the colour of a ripe cherry her husband likens it to—and in the splendid shapeliness of her form; with music in every sound she breathes and—my ear teaches me—grace in

every movement of her body. Such an example, I guess, of Nature's grandest gift to humankind as should make one bow one's head in humility! *That* is your daughter-in-law, Mrs. Smallwood.

[*Suddenly* MRS. CORSELLIS, *overcome by faintness, flops against* MRS. SMALLWOOD.]

MRS. CORSELLIS.

Ah——!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Supporting her.*] Oh, *bother!* Hold up, dear lady! If anybody gives way, it ought to be *me.* [*Putting her into the chair at the nearer end of the refectory-table.*] Vicar! [*To* SMALLWOOD, *pointing to her handbag.*] Smelling-salts—my bag——

CORSELLIS.

[*Going to* MRS. CORSELLIS *in terror.*] Oh, Jenny, Jenny! Wait, wait! [*Clasping his hands.*] Not *here,* Jenny; not *here!*

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Who has grabbed her bag from* SMALLWOOD *and produced from it a bottle of salts—pushing* CORSELLIS *aside and holding the bottle to* MRS. CORSELLIS'S *nose.*] Don't be foolish, man.

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Collect yourself, madam; collect yourself, I beg. [*To* HILLGROVE—*mastering his excitement with difficulty.*] My—my—my stepson and his wife are upstairs, sir?

HILLGROVE.

[*Nodding.*] We are to strike the gong—the gong by the front-door—when they are to come down. [*Resuming his seat on the settee.*] Strike it loudly; they've shut themselves in.

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] V-V-Violet——?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS—*bending over her.*] How do you feel?

CORSELLIS.

[*On the other side of* MRS. CORSELLIS—*the side nearest the window—anxiously.*] Jenny——?

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Recovering by degrees.*] He, he, he, he——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] If you would prefer to retire, madam—a course which I am inclined to recommend——

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Adjusting her hat.*] No, no; please allow me to remain. A momentary faintness; nothing more. He, he, he, he!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To* MRS. SMALLWOOD.] Shall I—shall I strike the gong, then?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Laying her bag on the refectory-table.*] *I* will.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Hurt.*] By all means.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

His mother——! [*She goes to the gong, attempts to strike it, and falters. Then she returns to* SMALLWOOD *and offers him the drum-stick nervously.*] R-R-Rupert——

[*He accepts the drum-stick with a dignified inclination of his head and brandishes it in*

preparation. MRS. SMALLWOOD *sinks into the chair on the left of the refectory-table and sniffs her salts.*]

SMALLWOOD.

[*To the* CORSELLISES.] Are you ready? [*They weakly signify assent.*] You are ready, Violet?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Quite.

[*Pulling himself together, he strides to the gong and beats it long and noisily. Then he hurriedly replaces the drum-stick and retreats to the farther end of the refectory-table. A hush falls upon them all.* HILLGROVE *sits immobile, his hands resting on his knees.*]

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*After a while.*] T't, t't, t't! Why don't they make haste?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Watching the stairs.*] H'sh, h'sh, h'sh!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Meditatively.*] A remarkable family, mine; a remarkable family! My aunt Priscilla, bedridden for years, rose and walked to the window to view the Jubilee procession in ninety-seven.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Snapping at her.*] Yes, yes; yes, yes.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Sniffing her salts.*] Even if they are exaggerating slightly, it's amazing. Amazing!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Hysterically.*] He, he, he, he——!

SMALLWOOD.

[*To her.*] Tscht, tscht, tscht!

CORSELLIS.

Jenny——!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Oliver was always prone to exaggeration. So was his father before him. [*Another sniff.*] Cyril—my first husband—couldn't speak the truth if he tried.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Under his breath—scowling at her.*] Pah-h-h-h!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

Latterly he gave up trying. [*To* HILLGROVE.] Have they been seen by any of the people hereabouts, Colonel—the villagers—the yokels——?

HILLGROVE.

No. They've been concealing themselves—lying close.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

The servant—what's the name of the eccentric individual?—Mrs. Meadows——

HILLGROVE.

Mrs. Minnett——?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

They can't avoid *her*. How does *she* take the change in them——?

SMALLWOOD.

[*Sharply.*] Silence! [*Turning away.*] Here they are!

[*Again there is a short pause, and then the real* OLIVER *and* LAURA *descend the stairs—the poor wreck of a man and the uncomely young woman of the First Act. Their very garments appear to have lost their smartness and to be hanging upon them limply and dejectedly, and altogether they are a most pathetic spectacle. Slowly and self-consciously they advance*

to the middle of the inner hall, MR. *and* MRS. SMALLWOOD *and the* CORSELLISES *staring at them aghast.*]

OLIVER.

[*Presenting* LAURA *to* MRS. SMALLWOOD *with sheepish pride.*] My wife, mater. I hope you and she will be tremendous pals. [*To* SMALLWOOD.] Step, this is Laura. [*Greeting the* CORSELLISES *as he moves towards* HILLGROVE.] How're you, Mrs. Corsellis? How're you, Rector?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Giving* LAURA *her hand shrinkingly.*] How—how do you do?

LAURA.

[*Meekly.*] It is so kind of you to come and see me—[*to* SMALLWOOD, *who, to obtain a closer view of* LAURA, *intrudes himself between her and* MRS. SMALLWOOD] and you, Mr. Smallwood. [*Giving him her hand.*] Thank you. [*Going to the* CORSELLISES *and kissing* MRS. CORSELLIS, *who rises unsteadily.*] Dear Mrs. Corsellis! [*Shaking hands with* CORSELLIS.] Rector——

OLIVER.

[*To the* SMALLWOODS, MRS. SMALLWOOD *having laid her smelling-bottle on the refectory-table and risen and*

joined SMALLWOOD, *whose arm she is clutching—smiling rather fatuously.*] Well, mother—well, Step—this is a rum business, isn't it? [*There is no response.* MR. *and* MRS. SMALLWOOD *and the* CORSELLISES *continue to gaze at him and* LAURA *open-mouthed.*] No wonder you're a bit knocked over. [*Beginning to swagger a little.*] Major Hillgrove has explained, I suppose, the way it's all happened?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Gasping.*] H-h-happened, Olly?

OLIVER.

The change in us—in Laura and myself. Did you ever know anything so marvellous? [*Growing impatient.*] Confound it, mother! You can't judge of the alteration in my wife, of course; but the difference in *me!* You'd hardly credit that your son had been badly crocked, would you?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

M-m-my dear boy, I—I——

SMALLWOOD.

[*Stopping her.*] Ssh! [*Giving her a significant look.*] Ss-s-s-sh! [*To* OLIVER, *in the tone one uses to humour a sick or insane person.*] Yes, yes, the change is most marked, Oliver; most marked.

OLIVER.

Marked! [*Half indignant, half perplexed.*] Is that all you've got to say? [*To the* CORSELLISES.] Mrs. Corsellis—Rector—*you* can be a little more expansive, I hope? Ha! *You* see a change in us that's a little more than "marked," don't you? [*Pointing to* LAURA.] Laura there! [*Hotly.*] Isn't she perfectly beautiful? [*To* MRS. CORSELLIS.] Mrs. Corsellis——!

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*Clinging to* CORSELLIS.] I—he, he, he!—I—oh!——

CORSELLIS.

[*Shaking her.*] Ssh! [*Looking at her significantly.*] Ss-s-s-sh! [*To* OLIVER, *in a similar tone to* SMALLWOOD'S.] Er—h'm—there certainly is—h'm—er—a slight change, Mr. Bashforth——

OLIVER.

Slight——!

LAURA.

[*With parted lips and wide-open eyes, crossing to* OLIVER.] Oliver——!

[*As* LAURA *goes to* OLIVER, MR. *and* MRS. SMALLWOOD *and the* CORSELLISES *in an*

access of panic hurriedly move to the farther end of the refectory-table, where MRS. SMALLWOOD, *assisted by* SMALLWOOD, *scrambles into her outdoor things.*]

OLIVER.

[*Turning to them—blankly.*] What—what——?

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

We—we—we—we are very sorry, my pet, that we're obliged to run away. [*Putting on her scarf.*] This is only a flying visit.

SMALLWOOD.

Just to have a glimpse of you and your wife.

OLIVER.

But—but——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Thrusting her arms into her coat-sleeves.*] An old promise of Rupert's. He's taking me on to—to—to——

SMALLWOOD.

[*At a loss.*] To—to—to——

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Inspired.*] To Bognor!

SMALLWOOD.

To Bognor.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*As* SMALLWOOD *squeezes past the* CORSELLISES *to get at his overcoat, etc.*] Your stepfather hasn't been to Bognor for an age.

SMALLWOOD.

[*Hastily attiring himself.*] Not since I was a chubby, apple-faced urchin.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*Gathering up her smelling-bottle, gloves and handbag, and approaching* LAURA *and* OLIVER, *who, astounded, are standing motionless.*] G-g-good-bye, my dears! [*Shaking* LAURA'S *hand.*] Every happiness attend you both! [*Kissing* OLIVER.] I—I—I'll write to you soon, darling. [*Glaring at* HILLGROVE.] Good afternoon, General.

[*She makes way for* SMALLWOOD *and goes to the* CORSELLISES *and whispers to them.*]

SMALLWOOD.

[*Shaking* LAURA'S *hand and then* OLIVER'S.] Good-bye. Good-bye. Accept my warm felicitations. [*To* HILLGROVE, *sternly.*] I wish you good day, sir.

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*As* SMALLWOOD *turns from* LAURA *and* OLIVER.] Mr. and Mrs. Carthew are coming with us, Rupert.

[*The* CORSELLISES *advance to* LAURA *and* OLIVER *as* SMALLWOOD *and* MRS. SMALLWOOD *creep to the front-door.*]

SMALLWOOD.

[*As he and* MRS. SMALLWOOD *go out, breathing deeply.*] Bognor!

MRS. SMALLWOOD.

[*In the same tone.*] Bognor!

CORSELLIS.

[*Shaking* LAURA'S *hand timorously.*] Er—h'm—it will save Jenny a toilsome trudge. [*Shaking* OLIVER'S *hand.*] Good-bye. [*With a gesture of bewilderment.*] Good afternoon, Major Hillgrove.

MRS. CORSELLIS.

[*As* CORSELLIS *turns to the door—throwing her arms round* LAURA'S *neck.*] I don't care! I don't care! [*Snivelling.*] If you were stark raving mad, you should be godmother to my next. [*To* OLIVER.] Good afternoon, Mr. Bashforth. [*To* HILLGROVE.] Good afternoon, Major.

[*She flutters after* CORSELLIS *and they follow the* SMALLWOODS. *Again there is a short pause.* OLIVER *and* LAURA *stand staring at one another in utter stupefaction.*]

OLIVER.

[*Breaking the silence.*] Mad—— !

LAURA.

[*Nodding.*] They think we're lunatics !

OLIVER.

Daft !

LAURA.

Demented !

OLIVER.

[*Leaving her and hobbling about excitedly.*] Why should they ? Why should they ? I—I don't understand. [*Waving his arms.*] What's the meaning of their behaviour ? [*Violently.*] What the hell's the meaning of it ? [*She runs to him, to restrain him, and he grips her wrists and gazes into her face with ardour.*] You're beautiful. You're beautiful. You're beautiful.

LAURA.

[*Returning his gaze.*] You're handsome. You're handsome. You're handsome.

OLIVER.

[*Embracing her.*] Mad, are we! Ha, ha, ha! [*Pressing his lips to hers passionately and then holding her at arm's length.*] Well, if we're mad, by God, we're not blind!

LAURA.

[*Clapping her hand to his mouth and glancing at* HILLGROVE.] Ss-s-s-sh——!

[*The motor-horn sounds a warning note; then at intervals the hoots are repeated till the distance swallows them up.* HILLGROVE *has been sitting with strained ears and a slowly dawning look of consternation. He now rises and, advancing a step, stretches out his hands towards* LAURA.]

HILLGROVE.

[*Thickly.*] Mrs. Bashforth—Laura—Laura——

LAURA.

[*Going to him.*] Yes?

HILLGROVE.

[*Touching her hair.*] Let me—let me——

LAURA.

[*In assent.*] Yes.

[*Tremblingly but carefully he passes his hands over her face, lingering at every feature. Then, in like manner, he feels her arms from her shoulders downward. The last hoot of the motor-horn is heard as he releases her and puts her from him.*]

LAURA.

[*Dismayed.*] Major Hillgrove—— !

OLIVER.

[*Coming to her.*] Hillgrove—— !

LAURA.

I—I—I'm beautiful, am I not ?

HILLGROVE.

[*His chin on his breast.*] Don't ask me. Don't—don't ask me.

LAURA.

[*Recoiling.*] Ah—— !

OLIVER.

But—but—you *hear*, HILLGROVE !

LAURA.

You *hear !*

OLIVER.

Damn it, Hillgrove, you don't imply that my wife and I have been lying to you!

LAURA.

Major Hillgrove——!

HILLGROVE.

Heaven forbid! [*Brokenly.*] But it's evident—that we—that we're under an illusion——

OLIVER.

Illusion——!

LAURA.

Illusion——!

HILLGROVE.

A strange—a strange illusion——

[*Suddenly they all turn their heads in the direction of the kitchen and listen intently.*]

OLIVER.

[*In an awed voice.*] What's that?

LAURA.

Somebody cried out.

HILLGROVE.

Somebody cried out.

OLIVER.

Mrs. Minnett!

LAURA.

[*Quaking.*] Hark——!

OLIVER.

She's moving about——

LAURA.

In the passage.

OLIVER.

Spying?

LAURA.

She may be ill again——

OLIVER.

[*Limping towards the passage.*] Curse——!

LAURA.

[*Following him and detaining him.*] No. [*Pulling him back.*] I'm frightened. I'm frightened.

OLIVER.

[*The thought flashing through him—facing her.*] The witch!

LAURA.

The witch!

OLIVER.

The witch !

HILLGROVE.

[*Firmly.*] Bashforth——

OLIVER.

[*To him.*] Eh ?

HILLGROVE.

Ring—ring the bell.

OLIVER.

Ring—— !

HILLGROVE.

Ring for the woman.

[OLIVER *goes to the fireplace and presses the bell-push.* LAURA *leans for support against the nearer end of the refectory-table.*]

OLIVER.

[*In a moment or two—by the smoking-table.*] She's coming.

[*Presently* MRS. MINNETT *appears and stands in the middle of the arched opening.*]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*To* LAURA—*almost inaudibly.*] Yes, ma'am ?

HILLGROVE.

Mrs. Minnett——

MRS. MINNETT.

Sir ?

HILLGROVE.

Come here. [MRS. MINNETT *advances slowly and painfully. As she does so,* OLIVER *tip-toes over to* LAURA *and puts his hand on hers.*] Mrs. Minnett—answer me—you have known Mrs. Bashforth, as Miss Pennington, for a long time ?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Her head bowed, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.*] Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

And Mr. Bashforth for some months ?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

So before their marriage you were thoroughly familiar with their appearance ?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Cast your mind back to their wedding-day, a little over a week ago. It's clear in your memory ?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

I recollect you gave me a few details of it yesterday. You can recall their home-coming with the utmost distinctness ?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Attend. When they entered this cottage—you were at the door to receive them, weren't you ?——

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

When they entered this cottage they were as you had always known them ?

MRS. MINNETT.

Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Now, after they had been in the house a little while, did you observe anything in the nature of a change in them ? [MRS. MINNETT *is silent.*] Eh, Mrs. Minnett ?

MRS. MINNETT

They—they were very quiet, sir—soft in their manner of speaking—timid-like——

HILLGROVE.

Yes, but in their outward appearance—their looks? [*Another silence.*] Mrs. Minnett——

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Darting a pitiful glance at* OLIVER *and* LAURA *and then lowering her head again.*] No, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Not after they had dined, and were sitting cosily together?

MRS. MINNETT.

No, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Nor the next morning, when they came down to breakfast?

MRS. MINNETT.

No, sir.

HILLGROVE.

You've noticed no alteration since then? [*She shakes her head.*] Eh?

MRS. MINNETT.

No, sir.

HILLGROVE.

Look at Mr. and Mrs. Bashforth, Mrs. Minnett. [MRS. MINNETT *doesn't stir.*] Are you looking? [*With*

an effort she turns her eyes upon OLIVER *and* LAURA. *They draw themselves up stiffly, to confront her.*] Tell us: are they still as you have always known them?

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Resuming her former attitude.*] Yes, sir.

HILLGROVE.

No change? [*She lifts her arms feebly and then drops them by her side.*] Eh?

MRS. MINNETT.

None, sir.

HILLGROVE.

[*Controlling his emotion—to* OLIVER.] Have you —have you any questions to put to Mrs. Minnett, old chap?

OLIVER.

[*Dazed.*] I? No. No.

[MRS. MINNETT *is dragging herself away when she halts and addresses* OLIVER *and* LAURA.]

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Humbly.*] I—I'm sorry, sir; I'm sorry, ma'am. I knew you had to find out the truth this afternoon and it nearly broke me; nearly broke me.

LAURA.

[*Clinging to* OLIVER.] T-t-thank you; thank you.

MRS. MINNETT.

[*Bringing herself erect.*] And yet—what is there to be sorry for? [*Going to them and peering into their faces.*] Pardon me for the liberty—shall I let you into the secret? [*Her eyes gleaming.*] Shall I? Shall I?

LAURA.

[*Shrinking from her.*] Yes—yes——

MRS. MINNETT.

You love each other. You love each other; and a man and woman in love have a gift of sight that's not granted to other folk. [*Rubbing her hands together.*] Ho, ho! I've watched you; I've watched you from the beginning; and on the day of your wedding I saw your love blaze up like dry kindling-wood when you set a match to it. Keep your love burning; keep it burning, and I promise you you'll never be anything to one another but fair and bonny. [*Throwing up her arms wildly and beating her brow.*] Ah! Ah! Scarecrow—scarecrow that I am, if my man could rise out of his grave and walk in at this minute, I should

be pretty to *him*; I should be pretty to *him*. [*Walking, with a swaying gait, to the passage, her voice dying to a moan.*] Pretty to *him!* Pretty to *him!* Pretty to *him!*

LAURA.

[*Calling to her faintly.*] Mrs. Minnett! [*As* MRS. MINNETT *disappears, running after her.*] Mrs. Minnett——!

[*Again there is a pause, during which the two men are as still as statues, and then* OLIVER *rouses himself.*]

OLIVER.

[*To* HILLGROVE.] Well! No fault of yours, Hillgrove. No fault of yours.

HILLGROVE.

[*Smiling, but with a touch of sadness.*] Ah! [*Groping on the round table for his hat and stick.*] Very good of yer. Very good of yer.

OLIVER.

[*Listlessly.*] Are you off?

HILLGROVE.

Yes. Rigg was to have fetched me later on, but I'll get back. I'll get back. [*Finding his hat and*

stick.] Is there anybody about the place who'll lend me an arm ?

OLIVER.

Laura and I will take you. [*With a short laugh.*] Ha, ha ! No reason *now* why we shouldn't show ourselves, Hillgrove.

HILLGROVE.

[*Softly.*] Poor Laura ! Poor little woman !

[LAURA *returns. With tear-filled eyes, but smiling sweetly, she comes to* OLIVER *and lays her head upon his breast.*]

OLIVER.

[*Patting her shoulder.*] Buck up, ol' lady ! Buck up ! Run upstairs and put your hat on.

LAURA.

[*Raising her head.*] My hat—— ?

OLIVER.

[*Brightening.*] We're convoying Hillgrove across the Park, you and I. We needn't sneak about in the dusk any longer. [*Seeing a look of extreme lassitude in her face.*] You're tired ?

LAURA.

[*Nodding drowsily.*] *So* weary, Olly. Those stupid dreams last night; and then—*this!* I'll rest on the sofa, and be lively for you by the time you're home. [*Turning to* HILLGROVE, *who has felt his way towards them, and slipping her hand in his.*] Major Hillgrove——

HILLGROVE.

Forgive me—forgive me——

LAURA.

H'sh! Dear friend!

HILLGROVE.

[*Kissing her hand.*] Good-bye.

LAURA.

[*Tenderly.*] Till to-morrow——[*after a moment's hesitation, brushing his cheek with her lips*] till to-morrow. [*To* OLIVER.] Don't hurry; I sha'n't be lonely.

[*Tapping the floor with his stick,* HILLGROVE *cautiously makes for the open door. While he is doing so,* OLIVER *leads* LAURA *to the settee, and there they talk in subdued tones to the accompaniment of the tap-tap-tap of* HILLGROVE'S *stick.*]

OLIVER.

[*Gazing at her fondly.*] Sweetheart——

LAURA.

[*Smiling at him.*] Yes ?

OLIVER.

After all, what does it matter—[*tap-tap*] what the devil does it matter ? [*Tap-tap.*] As poor Mrs. Minnett would be to her husband, were he alive—[*tap-tap-tap*] you're pretty to *me.* You're pretty to *me.*

LAURA.

And you, Oliver—[*tap-tap*] you'll always, always be handsome to *me.* [*She glances at* HILLGROVE. *He has reached the door and is standing in the sunlight, his face to the garden.*] Olly——

OLIVER.

Eh ?

LAURA.

[*In a whisper, holding the lapels of his jacket.*] Olly—if there's a child—if there's a child, there's a chance—a chance—that it will be beautiful, isn't there ?

OLIVER.

A chance ? A certainty !

LAURA.

[*With worshipping eyes.*] Because of *you!* Because of *you!*

OLIVER.

If it's a girl, it'll be the most beautiful thing in creation; if it's a boy—the rippingest kid that ever breathed!

LAURA.

[*Contentedly, sitting.*] Ah-h-h-h!

OLIVER.

[*Laughing at her gently.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha! [*She curls herself up on the settee and he arranges the pillows under her head.*] I'll draw the curtains, to keep the light from you, shall I?

LAURA.

[*Shutting her eyes.*] My love!

OLIVER.

[*After a pause—surveying her.*] Happy?

LAURA.

[*Half asleep already.*] Happy.

[*He goes to the window quietly and draws the curtains. Then, having snatched a cap from*

one of the hooks in the entrance hall, and selected a stick from the vase, he guides HILLGROVE *into the garden. He returns almost immediately to close the door, which he does with a final, satisfied look at* LAURA. *Both the entrance hall and the inner hall are now in semi-darkness. Soon the air is charged with music again, and once more the stars shine and twinkle on the walls—to be quenched as before by the pallid glow of dreamland; and presently the curtains are parted and the figure appears of a nurse carrying a tiny baby. The nurse has angel's wings, and the face, radiant in glory, of* MRS. MINNETT. *Crossing to* LAURA *with soundless steps, she places the baby reverently in the arms of the sleeping woman.*]

THE END

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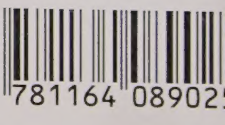

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